BASEBALL SUMMER SIZZLER

Sporting News

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

Do-before-you-die list Finally learn to...

NBA Finals Complete coverage

Special report

It's a 13-page baseball bash in pictures AND YOU'RE INVITED! Page 18

CELEBRATING summer's game

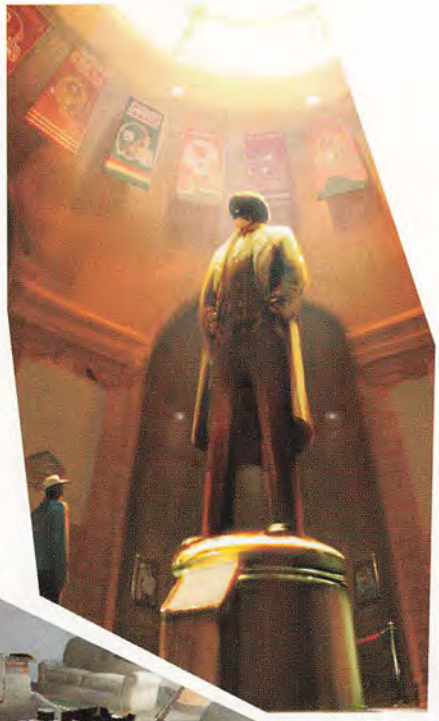
David 'Big Papi' Ortiz

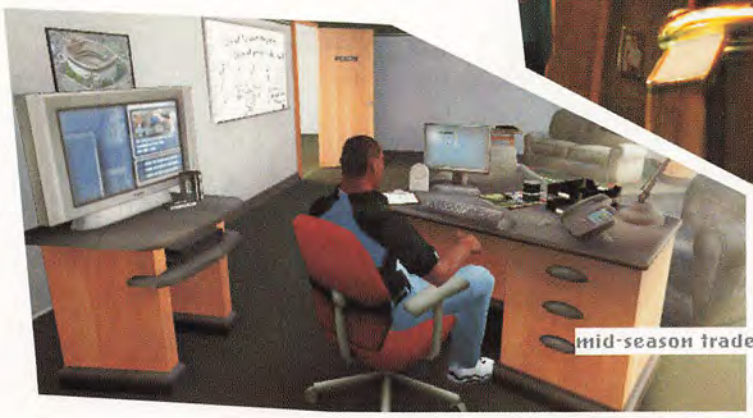
www.sportingnews.com June 23, 2006

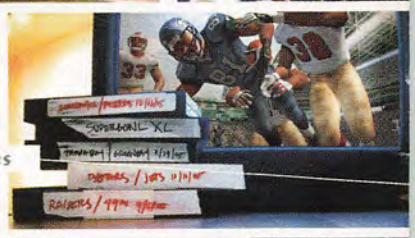
no more monday-morning quarterbacks

To create NFL Head Coach, the completely new football strategy game from EA SPORTS, the development team led by senior producer Jeremy Strauser set its sights on dropping hardcore football strategy fans straight into the demanding daily life of the pro coach. The action starts in the off-season, the day after Super Bowl XL. The game progresses one day at a time, as the coach puts together a roster and a coaching staff. Once the season starts, the coach and his staff scout the opponent each week and create a complete game plan.

On game day, it's the coach's job to make sure his team sticks to the game plan – until it's time to adjust to the opposing coach's moves. By figuring out what makes his players tick – in-your-face motivation or calm strategizing – the coach can change the players' ability ratings – and the outcome of the game. "You have to be thinking 20 moves ahead, like a great chess player, using reverse psychology," Strauser says. "NFL Head Coach is about the intellectual side of football."







mid-season trades

wanted: strategy freaks

Ever since EA SPORTS created Madden NFL Football 17 years ago, a crew of strategy-obsessed sports gamers has always looked to the game as a way to match wits with the NFL's top coaches. This brainy bunch has pushed deeper every year into the action on the sidelines and front offices. Finally, their game has arrived: NFL Head Coach, a football strategy game that takes players deep inside the NFL coach's daily challenges, strategic personnel moves and career decisions. NFL Head Coach comes from a development team with serious brainpower, including a rocket scientist and an aerospace engineer. "It's for students of the game and football purists," says EA SPORTS product manager Jerrold Smith, "guys who play NCAA Football in Dynasty Mode™ and Madden NFL Football in Franchise Mode – and still can't get enough strategy."

adversaries

INTERNET CONNECTION required for online play PlayStation®2 online play requires Internet Connection and Memory Card (8MB) (for PlayStation 2) (each sold separately). See product pack for details.

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TITLE

NFL HEAD COACH

EA SPORTS

FACTOID: 7500+ NFL games analyzed

INFORMATION
www.nflheadcoach.com

DEVELOPMENT START 04|18|05

DATE OF RELEASE 06|22|06

in coach we trust

Trust: impossible to quantify. Or is it? The development team behind NFL Head Coach spent the last year and a half actually coding a trust-level meter into the game. The high-pressure decisions a coach makes on game day make up about 10% of the work he does in the course of a week. NFL Head Coach puts those pulse-pounding game-day choices in the hands of gamers – plus the other 90%, a lot of which comes down to relationship management: communicating with player scouts before the draft; returning agents' calls and emails; dealing with a hands-on owner; getting your QB enough practice reps on key plays so he's sharp on Sunday; giving your star running back enough carries to keep him happy; letting the offensive coordinator call an off-tackle dive on a critical 4th and goal, even though your gut is telling you to go with a quarterback sneak.

Fail to maintain the trust level and watch your star players and top assistants head out the door and on to other teams. Keep your squad intact, create a juggernaut, and you stand a chance of joining greats like Shanahan, Gibbs and Cowher in the coaching pantheon.

SportingNews MAGAZINE

THIS WEEK

18

We told our photogs to give you a look at baseball from coast to coast. Of course, they went the extra foot when they dipped their toes into McCovey Cove.

ARIC CRABB FOR SN

> NBA FINALS

12 The 'tween year

Neither big nor small, neither newbies nor grizzled vets, it's 'tweeners such as Josh Howard and Dwyane Wade who are taking The Finals by storm. *By Sean Deveney*

> BASEBALL

18 Summer's game

Barry Bonds and Jason Grimsley be damned—this time of year belongs to the game of baseball. Our photographers capture the spirit of the sport, from the game's biggest stages to its most obscure fields.

4 KNOW IT ALL

4 **From the top down** Baseball's best must push to clean up their sport.
6 **On Deck** Two possible Game 7s and one heavy dose of hardball. Plus, **Bob Hille's Starting 5**.
7 **My Turn** Joe Buck quickly became a raving, stripping Caniac in Carolina.
8 **Your Turn** Jason Grimsley and Shaq seem to have solidified their legacies.
10 **Buzzer Beaters** Finally learn how to shoot a free throw, throw a curveball and do some other cool stuff.

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44 BASEBALL
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55 FANTASY
+
56 **DAVE KINDRED** NASCAR's rules aren't allowed to be broken—even when the drivers are.

COVER BY ROBERT SEALE / SN

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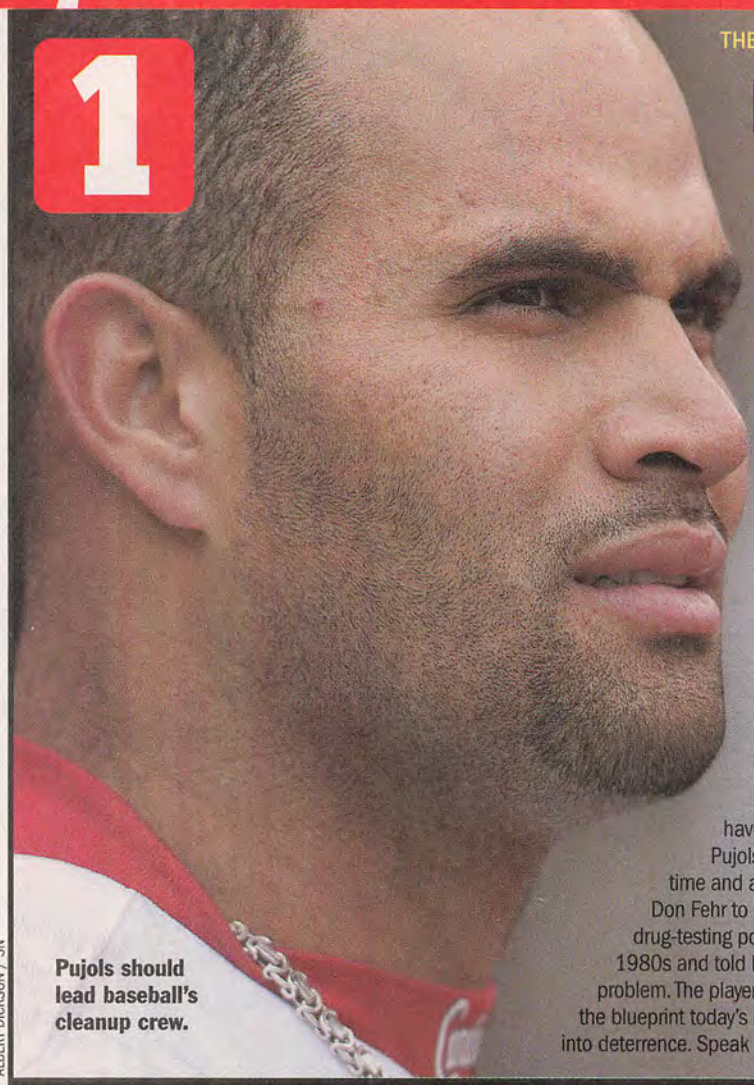
TO KNOW LIST

7 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

Pujols should lead baseball's cleanup crew.

THE MAIN EVENT

1 If you're clean and you know it, take a stand

Never has a player who accomplished so little left such a mark on baseball. The upside: Jason Grimsley has focused attention on the most compelling players in the game—Albert Pujols, Alex Rodriguez and Derek Jeter at the top of the list—who must take responsibility for attacking the problem of drug use among their peers.

Who will Grimsley drag down with him? It's riveting stuff. But as we try to play six degrees of separation from Grimsley and trainer Chris Mihlfeld, the real issues—human growth hormone and the best way to police its use—evade us.

HGH is the next step beyond steroids, and its illicit use is not new among athletes. It has wonderful ramifications when applied to help spur the growth of stunted children, but it is on baseball's list of banned drugs. The catch, of course: Players are not tested for it. The only way—and it's not infallible—to detect HGH is with blood tests, and those aren't permitted under the current contract that governs the teams and players.

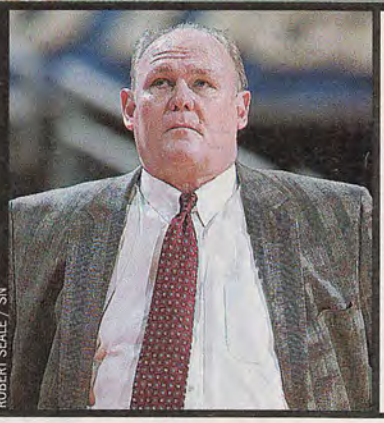
Many fans—and members of the media who show little inclination to study the facts—find it easy to caterwaul about Bud Selig, who did a considerable disservice with his remark last year that declared his war on drugs a success. He was either totally disingenuous or incredibly naive, neither of which helps attack the issue. But this is not Bud's problem to solve; he is powerless on the issue. No, this is Albert's and A-Rod's and Derek's problem. If they want their sport to be as clean as possible, only they have the power to accomplish that.

Pujols was as disingenuous as Selig when he offered last week to be tested at any time and any number of times for steroids. That does nothing. All Pujols has to do is tell Don Fehr to get a plan in place. The NFL was far ahead of other professional sports in its drug-testing policies because the most influential players went to Gene Upshaw in the early 1980s and told him they wanted the cheaters out. Upshaw and Paul Tagliabue did not attack the problem. The players did. Though the NFL is not now and never will be free of drug use, it does offer the blueprint today's baseball players must follow. Only the players have the power to make inroads into deterrence. Speak up, Albert. We are all waiting to hear your voice. —*John Rawlings*

YOU HEARD IT HERE

2 'No matter how tough we are as competitors, you don't want to fight cancer.'

—*Nuggets coach George Karl on son Coby (page 54)*



ROBERT SEALE / SN

SPORTS BUSINESS

3 The flyboys got this one right

See, investments *do* pay off. Six years ago, American Airlines secured the naming rights to the Heat's and the Mavericks' arenas. Now, both teams are in the NBA Finals—and it's paying off big-time for American. According to AdAge.com, American is expected to receive $9 million in brand exposure for each game of The Finals—a potential total of $63 million. Considering the price tag of $42 million over 20 years to name Miami's AmericanAirlines Arena, that ain't a bad deal. —*Tricia Garner*

NEWS YOU CAN'T USE *Experts fear global outbreak of crippling depression as NHL offseason sets in >> Heat's Walker touches rim in practice >> Big Unit to try pitching righthanded*

TELEVISION

4 Casing Kasey

Nearly half of NASCAR's fans are women, and at least one advertiser—Allstate—is taking notice and targeting female fans exclusively in its latest commercial.

The scene: A carload of women is on its way to see NASCAR driver Kasey Kahne at a meet-and-greet. Giddy with anticipation, they dab on extra lip gloss and fantasize about the possibilities. One blond soccer mom imagines Kahne swiping some grease on her cheek; she takes his face into both hands and goes in for the kill. Another woman envisions Kahne lofting a trophy in the air, then presenting her with an engagement ring. Busier dreaming than driving, they end up crashing their car—and smashing Kahne's in the process.

Not exactly the kind of memorable encounter they were hoping for, but there isn't a woman alive who can't relate. *—T.G.*

NASCAR

5 It's hard to believe in Dianetics Racing

Now that every Tom Cruise couch-jumping joke has been made, let's ask a simple question: Will the NASCAR car sponsored by *Dianetics*—the book behind Scientology—be any good? Nope. Any new team faces long odds of qualifying for Busch races, never mind succeeding in them.

Factory support is crucial, and the Dianetics team—which plans to try to qualify for the Busch race in September in California—has no chance of getting it. Manufacturers, sponsors and the sanctioning body want fans to think happy thoughts when NASCAR comes to mind. Imagine the marketing gurus in Detroit cringing as a driver says, "The Dianetics Ford was real good today." *—Matt Crossman*

STEVE RUARK / AP

He's tough, he leads—he's just what Baltimore desperately needs.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: RAVENS QB STEVE McNAIR

6 The job: Wake up the wimps on offense

When Steve McNair took the field this week for his first practice with the Ravens, the team wanted him to start filling the void that has been apparent since tight end Shannon Sharpe left Baltimore after the 2001 season. The Ravens are desperate for an offensive leader—a role that former starting quarterback Kyle Boller never came close to filling.

A veteran of 11 seasons, McNair has the pedigree. He has the strong arm, the winning record, the Pro Bowl accolades and the Super Bowl experience. But most important for the Ravens, he has a presence that commands respect.

The Ravens' offense has been stuck in the bottom half of the league rankings for seven years. There are some dominant players—Jamal Lewis, Jonathan Ogden, Todd Heap—but they aren't vocal and can't energize a team. McNair is fiery and tough. He'll audible; he'll gamble. He'll take charge of the offense in the final 2 minutes of the game, an area in which the Ravens have failed miserably.

The Ravens want McNair to be the offensive equal to middle linebacker Ray Lewis. They happen to be close friends—and the field is big enough for both of them. *—Mike Preston*

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE NHL?

7 An offseason of change ... just not as much as last year

Despite snake's-belly ratings, the NHL adores its television package. Commissioner Gary Bettman trumpets OLN's reach to 70 million homes, its growth potential and its willingness to give the league plenty of air time. In the forefront of issues for the NHL this offseason: efforts to broaden the league's fan base.

Last year's rules upheaval won't be duplicated. Frankenstein's monster was a beauty as game flow improved and Joe Thornton led a class of seven players with at least 100 points—the most in a decade. The focus will be on protecting goaltenders. Touters will hit doubters with two words: Dwayne Roloson.

Player personnel moves will be the rage in the coming weeks. First up: the June 24 entry draft—and expect a trade free-for-all. The free-agent market opens July 1, with Zdeno Chara, Patrik Elias and Ed Jovanovski topping the for-hire list. *—Ray Slover*

PAUL CHIASSON / AP

The Rolosons of the world could use a little extra protection.

>> Papelbon 'sick and tired' of fancy mustard jokes >> Marlins owner takes $11,000 on Deal or No Deal >> Report: Tagliabue to name Ditka as successor on Monday

ON DECK

The week ahead in sports

All times Eastern

THIS I GOTTA SEE

SAT 17

The **U.S. kicks it World Cup style** against Italy (2:30 p.m., ABC) and continues its quest to advance out of Group E.

SUN 18

Imagine Tiger's making a final-round charge to capture his third **U.S. Open** (12:30 p.m.)—on Father's Day. NBC execs have.

MARK J. TERRILL / AP

■ **Red Sox at Braves** (8 p.m., ESPN). To Sox fans, every day is Papi Day. But the big lug could get the night off in this no-DH game.

ERIC FRANCIS / AP

TUE 20

Put on your rally cap and settle in for—*ping!*—a double dose of double-digit fun from Omaha in Games 9 and 10 of the **College World Series** (5 and 9 p.m., ESPN2).

ROBERT SEALE / SN

WED 21

Real Sports (10 p.m., HBO) delves into the makeup of two baseball teams, the Pirates and Giants. Big deal? Well, these Pirates and Giants play at the San Quentin State Prison, giving new meaning to *baseball rehab*. Bryant Gumbel slips behind the walls to look at these games and players, many of whom are serving time for murder.

THU 22

Last year, the Spurs and Pistons snapped a string of 10 straight NBA Finals without a Game 7. Here's hoping the **Heat and Mavs** (9 p.m., ABC) make it two in a row tonight.

FRI 23

Remember when **Andre toppled The Giant**? Wimbledon is built for big servers such as 6-4 Goran Ivanisevic, but that didn't stop baselining Andre Agassi from claiming his first Grand Slam title in 1992 (1 p.m., ESPN Classic).

—Kyle Veltrop

VICTOR ROMERO / AP

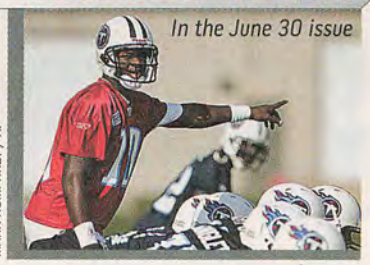
MON 19

The winners of **Oilers-Hurricanes** Game 7* (8 p.m., NBC) get to drink from Lord Stanley's Cup. The losers get a nice, firm handshake. (**If necessary, of course.*)

■ The NFL Network promises to take fans to new places. ***Making The Squad*** (8 p.m.) zeros in on promising hopefuls trying to latch on with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Oh, and did I mention it's the **Bucs' cheerleading squad**?

COMING AT YOU

In the June 30 issue



MARK HUMPHREY / AP

The education of Vince Young. A quarterback can't *learn* the rare presence Young has on the field, nor can a team hope for a more impressive combination of size, strength and speed at the position. But the Titans' rookie does have a few things to work on—details such as taking a snap under center, dropping back and reading NFL defenses. We'll examine what the Titans have taught Young so far, what they have on the agenda for him in the coming months—and whether this polarizing prospect is as far from ready as his critics believe.

■ All you need to know to decode the big leagues' most unpredictable division—the N.L. West.

■ You'd just *love* to be a sports agent, huh? Don't be so sure.

BOB HILLE'S STARTING 5

1 The NBA Finals. At last a matchup to define H-U-G-E: It's Shaq's caboose vs. Mark Cuban's mouth.

2 Baseball and HGH. I had the perfect clean joke. It'll have to wait, though, because I "tweaked" my left side starting to write it and now I'm day-to-day.

3 The NHL. It gave OLN the most-watched week in network history, which has the boys in programming thinking big. They're scrambling to get the Stanley Cup a guest shot with Babe Winkelman.

4 The U.S. Open. There's a lot of buzz about a "Mickelslam," which if you've seen Phil lately begs one question: Does that come with curly fries?

5 The World Cup. My soccer-loving friend says, "Imagine entire nations' productivity dropping to zero for two hours." That put it all in perspective for me. It's like morning coffee break at my office.

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MY TURN

Joe Buck

> FOX Sports' lead play-by-play announcer for the NFL and MLB > Frequent guest on Sporting News Radio

Superstition is the way

Pride takes a back seat when it comes to channeling a little good luck for your team

GERRY BROOME / AP

Lookee here—a game-winner! You gotta love this dadgum hockey.

Odds are, you've missed it. Odds are, because the dismal television ratings tell us so, one of the sports world's most exciting finals has passed you by.

Hockey fans are tired of hearing that the Stanley Cup playoffs take too long and that too many teams are let into the big dance. After witnessing the Stanley Cup finals in person for the first time, I am now a believer that the postseason should take as long as it needs to allow players' bodies time to recover from all of the pounding. I went to North Carolina for Game 1 last week. I have a friend who plays for Carolina. So I don't get accused of name-dropping, I will just identify him by saying that his last name is the thing I have been battling since I was a little fat kid.

OK, it's Doug Weight.

I cannot possibly convey to you how intense the whole experience was. They say everything is finer in Carolina. Well, now I get it. I am a Caniac. Although I often get accused of rooting for one team or another when I broadcast baseball or football, I am now admitting to being an unabashed fan of "redneck hockey." Within the span of a half-period, Doug's wife, Allison, made me a raving, superstitious lunatic. Before the game, I stood in line for a half-hour to buy a Hurricanes jersey so I could show my love as I climbed aboard the bandwagon. I wouldn't stand in line for a half-hour at the Playboy Mansion, yet there I was—ready to shell out for my very own authentic CCM jersey.

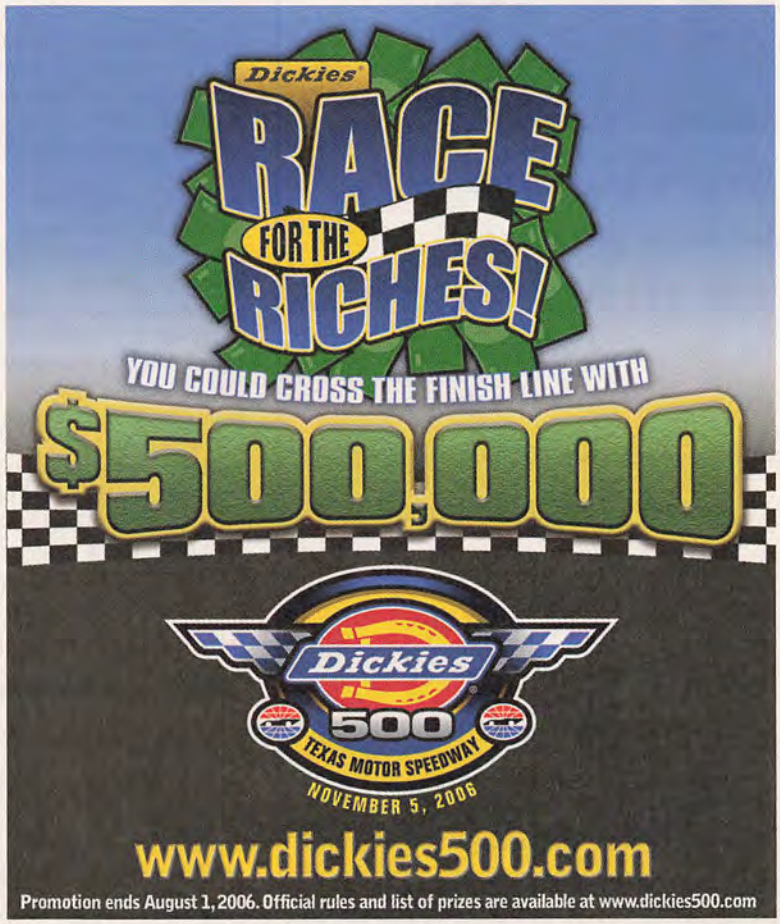
They say everything is finer in Carolina. Well, now I get it. I am a Caniac.

Late in the second period, my Hurricanes were down, 3-0, and life as a *stupidsticious* person began. I decided that by wearing my jersey right-side out, I probably was the reason the Oilers were dominating (well, that and Chris Pronger's phenomenal talent), so I reversed it. Not 30 seconds later, Carolina's Rod Brind'Amour stuffed in a rebound.

To help the Hurricanes get a little closer at the start of the third, off came my hat. Weight to Ray Whitney … GOAL! 3-2. What next? How about my shoes? Off they came, and in it went. Tie game. I was high-fiving people I had never seen before and never will again, but it felt like the thing to do. If I could have grown a playoff beard right then and there, I would have.

After Carolina took its first lead on a shorthanded goal by some guy named Justin Williams, the clock watch was on. I couldn't even begin to count the number of times I looked at that scoreboard pleading with time to make a run for it. Edmonton tied it, 4-4, and I had to go back to work. What was it going to take to get us over the hump? As I watched rookie goaltender Cam Ward stand on his head and make one game-saving dive after another, it hit me: the shirt. It had to come off.

Then it happened—Brind'Amour wrapped around the game-winner. It was loud, the Hurricanes won a game they shouldn't have, and I kept my shirt on. No overtime, no humiliation. Thank God—those ice rinks are really drafty. Can I get OLN in high-def?



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THE RIDGELINE

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YOUR TURN

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"And here I thought all Jason Grimsley would be remembered for was being the cruddy player traded for Curt Schilling." *–TomG via SportingNews.com*

ROY DABNER / AP

■ The lack of class that Tennessee showed in the Steve McNair situation should be a red flag for players. You can put the team on your back, but the minute the higher-ups decide you are no longer useful, you will be taken out behind the barn for "a walk." *–SpokaneOakfan via SportingNews.com*

■ NBA officials should start treating players like MLB officials do–argue with a call, and you're out of there. I've never seen so many grown men cry in my life. *–donovanmcnabb5 via e-mail*

■ The Suns seem to be in great shape for next season, barring unforeseen injuries and assuming Amare Stoudemire comes back strong. But Tim Thomas should go (SN, June 9). We've already seen the good Tim Thomas, so historically, all that is left is the other Tim Thomas. *–anavlas via SportingNews.com*

■ Notre Dame fans are arrogant and think they are better than the rest of the nation (SN, June 9). Unfortunately, they are what is wrong with college football. Notre Dame was once known as a respected Catholic institution. It has long since sold its soul for money. I wonder if Notre Dame football fans and Duke basketball fans hang out together. They are the most hated teams in America. *–rju103 via SportingNews.com*

■ Shaq is always good for a few good lines (SN, June 16). I find it quite funny how he has shut the traps of all those people who called him fat and lazy. *–Hoiberg23 via SportingNews.com*

■ Shaq is one of a kind. We will never see another one like him. I think he will be the last great pure center in the NBA. By taking three different teams to the Finals, he'll have a great legacy. *–francis_0512 via SportingNews.com*

RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

'Let's talk about that impressive tandem the Mavericks have at center with DeSagana Diop and Erick Dampier. I mean, if Diop and Dampier were on the Heat, you know where they would be? They would be with Jason Kapono up in the stands in a finely tailored suit.' *–Ivan in Miami on the SNR postgame with Patrick Cortes*

LM OTERO / AP

Hang around Shaq long enough, and you'll fall on the floor laughing.

POLLING PLACE

Will Roger Clemens help get the Astros back into the playoffs?

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YES 29% NO 71%

SPORTING NEWS STAFF

YES 26% NO 74%

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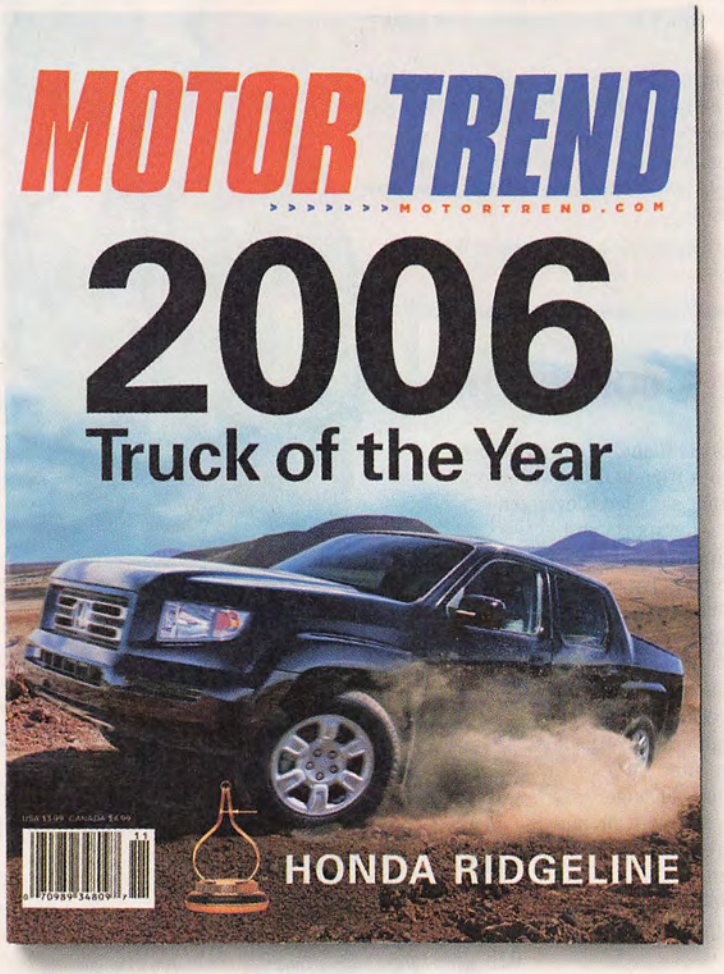

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BUZZER BEATERS 00:01

Things all sports fans must do before they die

You're the biggest sports nut around, but you've got some holes in your game.

Finally learn how to ...

... shoot a free throw

Suns forward **Boris Diaw**, *the NBA's Most Improved Player, on how to get yourself into a foul-shot groove:*

Set yourself. "A good base is important. I place my feet about shoulder-width apart, with the right foot on the line, the left an inch or so behind the right."

Find your form. "Shoot free throws like you do other shots—whatever you are comfortable with. You want to put the ball high and have a nice backspin."

Aim ... somewhere. "My coach asked me what I aim for, and I told him I really don't know. Some aim just over the front of the rim, some at the back. I think I picture the whole thing."

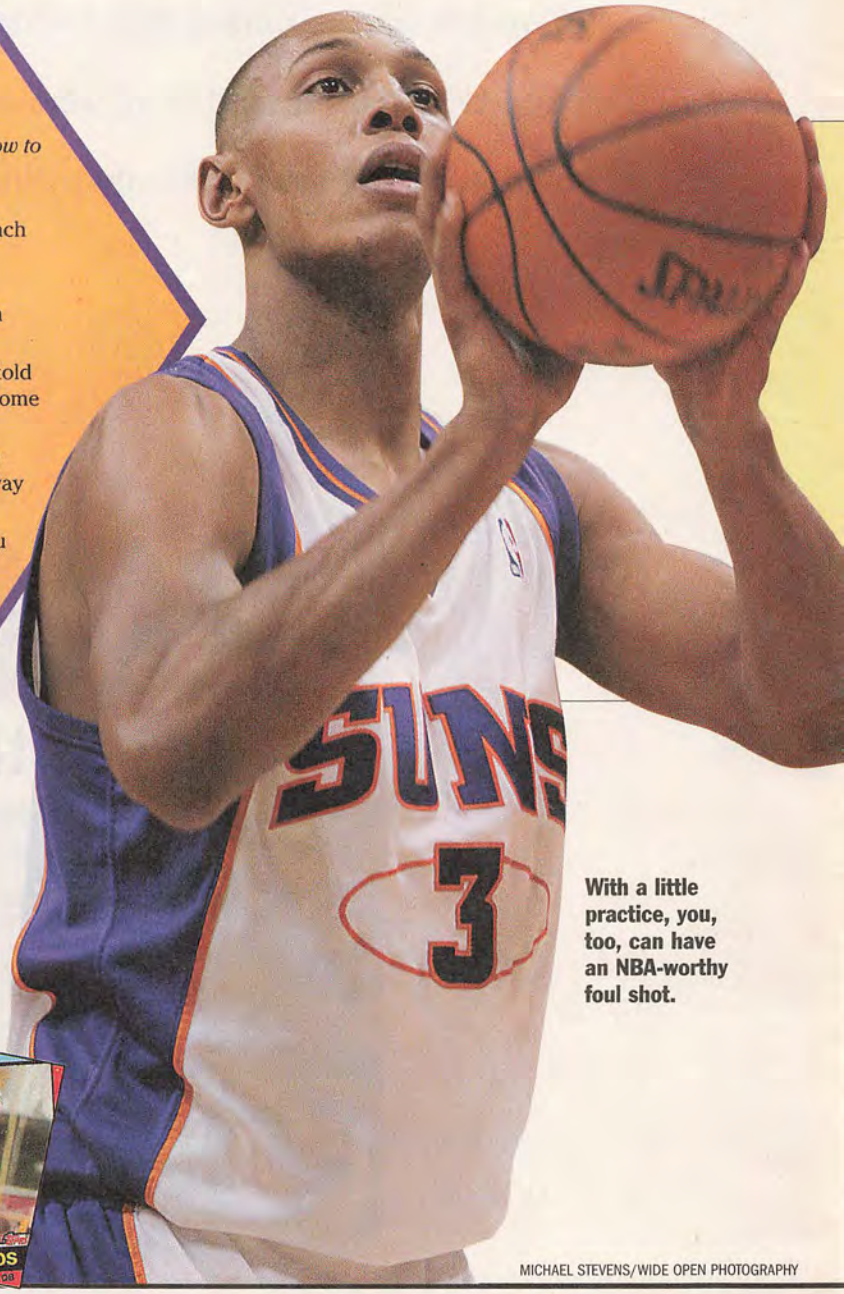
Routine's important. "The main thing is to always do the same thing before you shoot. I dribble twice. I hold the ball the same way every time. I use the same form."

Believe. "Confidence is the biggest reason I'm improving. If you don't think you're going to make it, you won't."

... build a sports collection

You want a sports memorabilia collection that will make your friends drool with envy. Start with the basics, says Jed Clevenger, category manager for sports and entertainment memorabilia at eBay. Were you a huge Dodgers fan as a kid? Track down something from that era. If you have no such loyalties and want to build up a collection with some value, Clevenger suggests buying a pack of new cards and waiting for a player to get hot. This year, for example, that player is Albert Pujols—his high-grade cards have shot up to as much as $9,000 on the site.

When buying cards or autographs, Clevenger recommends using a third party to authenticate and rate the condition of the item first (eBay links to such services on its site). It could mean the difference between getting, say, a John Elway rookie card valued at $30 or at $200. Now, get shopping!



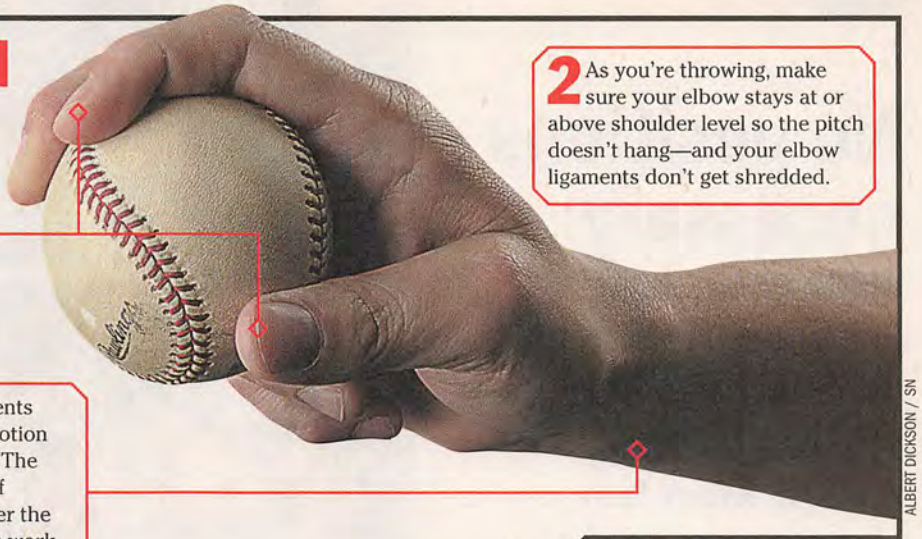
With a little practice, you, too, can have an NBA-worthy foul shot.

MICHAEL STEVENS/WIDE OPEN PHOTOGRAPHY

Wrangler Real. Comfortable. Jeans.

Wrangler Real. Comfortable. Jeans.

... throw a curveball



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

1 The grip: Your index finger and middle finger are almost touching and resting on or beside the narrow part of the seams. Your thumb is on the bottom of the ball. Leave a small space between the ball and the webbing that connects the base of your thumb to your index finger.

2 As you're throwing, make sure your elbow stays at or above shoulder level so the pitch doesn't hang—and your elbow ligaments don't get shredded.

3 "Snap"—not the sound of those ligaments shredding, but the quick downward motion your fingers and wrist make as you throw. The better the snap, the greater the spin and, if everything else is done correctly, the bigger the break. Your middle finger does most of the work.

... play Madden NFL online

It's the king of sports video games, but playing against the computer gets boring and figuring out that your buddy always throws a screen pass on third-and-long isn't difficult.

To take the online challenge, you first need a high-speed Internet connection. PlayStation 2 and Xbox online accessories come with a disc that walks you through the online setup. PS2 owners need a memory card and a network adapter ($40), which connects to your modem with an ethernet cable. Slim model PS2 consoles have the adapter built in, and the online compatibility also is built into the Xbox. You can connect over a wireless network, using a router and wireless-ethernet bridge.

Once you're set up, EA Sports doesn't charge to play Madden online. Well, it charges a $2 fee, but that's waived if you pony up an e-mail address they can pass along to ESPN, which will spam you. But to play Xbox games online, you need an Xbox Live subscription ($49.99 per year, or $69.99 if you buy it in a package that includes a headset).

... watch a NASCAR race (and *like* it)

You understand racing. Start here, first one there wins. You need to learn to *enjoy* racing, and for that you need a rooting interest. Nobody in his right mind would watch more than a few minutes of cars going in circles if he didn't care who won or lost. Same goes for watching men try to put a ball through a hoop.

"But," you say, "I know nothing about these lads who are driving. For whom shall I root?" It doesn't matter how you pick your drivers—it can be because you hate the car's yellow hood, drink the sponsor every Friday and Saturday (and, be honest, most Tuesdays), think all people named Jeff are dweebs, whatever.

To keep track of your drivers, check the scroll on-screen—that's the "score," the running order. If the guy you want to win goes more than one lap down, he's done and you'll have to live with rooting hard against that Marypants in the ugly yellow car.

HAROLD HINSON FOR SN

... pick a winner

(and have fun doing it)

Brandon Lang, *gambling guru and inspiration for the 2005 movie Two for the Money, offers his tips for newbies:*

1 Understand the line. "Vegas sets a competitive line to get action on both sides. If everyone likes one side, you probably want to be on the other side."

2 Ride those hot streaks ... "It's easier to sleep at night knowing you went with an 8-0 streak that came to an end than against a team that went to 9-0."

3 ... and those home underdogs. "The public likes to bet the favorite. Find the dog—a dog is a man's best friend."

4 Look at the guy on the sideline. "Some coaches motivate better than others. That's huge when it comes to covering the spread."

5 Don't chase. "You always want to bet the same amount. You can't win with scared money—your mentality changes and you lose your clarity. Find your comfort zone and stay in it."

Contributors: Matt Crossman, Seth Elkin, Tricia Garner, Tom Gatto and Stan McNeal

Wrangler Real. Comfortable. Jeans.
Wrangler Real. Comfortable. Jeans.

No positions necessary:

Some of the best players in these Finals don't fit the mold

By Sean Deveney

Photos by Robert Seale

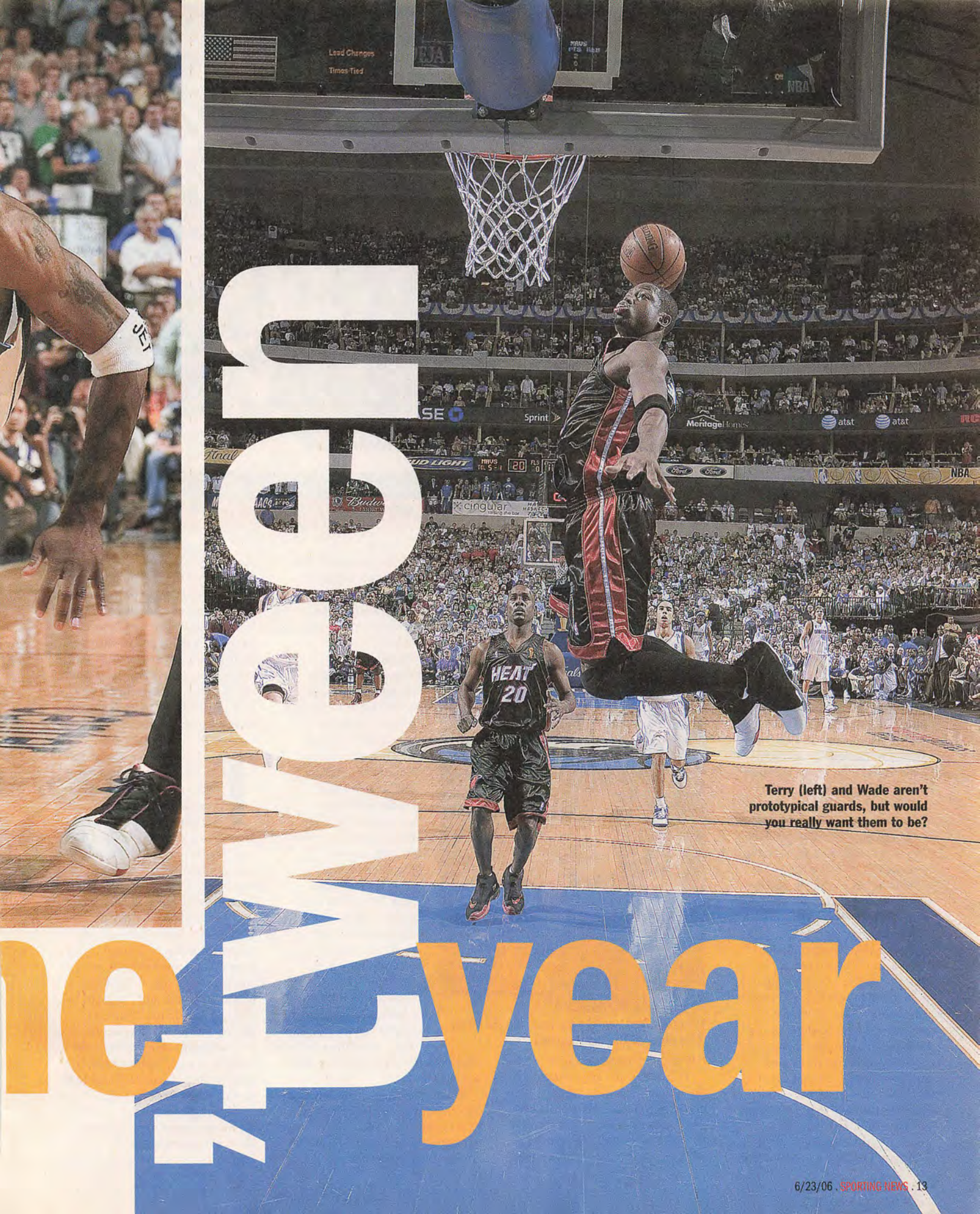
Three years ago last January, Jason Terry sat near his locker at Philips Arena in Atlanta and shrugged his shoulders. He was in the middle of his fourth season with the Hawks and doing what he could to shed his image as a chucker point guard. (You know, give him the ball, and he'll chuck it.) Terry ended up averaging 7.4 assists that season—2.5 more than his career average heading into the year—but the Hawks still stunk, so whispers about Terry's ability to run an offense persisted. That summer, Terry was a restricted free agent and had to wait till September to get an offer. "I don't know what else I can do," Terry said at the time. "My assists are up, my scoring is down. I've tried to change."

Aha! Maybe that was the problem: Terry was trying to change. Of course, he was being prodded into it. See, Terry is a classic 'tweener, that oddball species of NBA player whose body type suggests one position while his skills suggest something entirely different. Terry, for example, is a point guard with a shooting guard's skills. For NBA personnel types, such players usually bring furrowed brows and migraines—the league, in general, treats 'tweener-ness as a disease to be drubbed out of the afflicted. That's what Atlanta was doing with Terry.

Now, here's Terry, standing 6-2 and listed as Dallas' starting point guard but barreling through the postseason with numbers that only a shooting guard could love (18.4 points per game and just 4.0 assists). He may still be a 'tweener, but he is looking like a championship-caliber 'tweener. He helped push the Mavericks to a daunting 2-0 lead with a pair of double-digit home wins to open The Finals. Terry almost single-handedly led Dallas to a win in Game 1 by shooting 13-for-18 and scoring 32 points on a night when the combo of Dirk Nowitzki and Josh Howard was frigid from the field. "We need this Jason Terry," Mavericks coach Avery Johnson said. "This Jason Terry makes us a pretty special basketball team because on a night like tonight, when Josh and Dirk go 7-for-28, you need to get some offense from somewhere."

In this unexpected, oddball championship matchup between the Heat and the Mavericks, maybe it's fitting that a 'tweener such as Terry becomes a hero. These are two teams that have offered acceptance to the oddball player, teams that have put aside the drubbing and, instead, embraced the 'tweener. That mind-set has paid off. Dallas starts three 'tweeners. Terry is at the point. Nowitzki, a 7-footer with a shooting guard's stroke, starts at power forward. Howard, whose 'tweener status dropped him all the way to No. 29 in the 2003 draft, is the small forward. Keith Van Horn and Marquis Daniels are the Mavs' 'tweeners in reserve.

Miami is similar. Though the Heat revolves around non-'tweener Shaquille O'Neal—you can't be a



Terry (left) and Wade aren't prototypical guards, but would you really want them to be?

ne next year

Mathematicians and free throw coaches agree: O'Neal has a better chance of being hit by lightning than he does of making this free throw.

Crying foul

The big issue in the early part of this Finals was the big misses by the Big Fella, Heat center Shaquille O'Neal. In the opener, O'Neal was not just off on his free throws, he was brutal and pushed them far to the right. He shot 1-for-9, plus forfeited two shots on lane violations. This, naturally, set off much hand-wringing over Shaq's great deficiency.

But, contrary to popular belief, it appears the fuss is much ado about nothing. A breakdown of the Heat's winning percentage during this regular season and playoffs shows Shaq's free throws don't matter much in determining the outcome of his team's games.

When Shaq shoots ...	80 percent or better	70-79 percent	60-69 percent	50-59 percent	40-49 percent	30-39 percent	20-29 percent	0-19 percent
Miami is ...	4-1 (.800)	4-2 (.667)	9-2 (.818)	10-4 (.714)	5-3 (.625)	6-2 (.750)	9-5 (.643)	6-5 (.545)

350-pound 'tweener—it has had to turn to its stable of 'tweeners as O'Neal has struggled. (He took 11 shots in Game 1 and just five in Game 2.) The Heat plays 6-9 Antoine Walker, who has been a power forward for the bulk of his career, at small forward. The power forward is Udonis Haslem, who injured his shoulder in Game 2. Haslem was a small (6-8) big man coming out of college and got 'tweener-ed right out of the draft before the Heat signed him in 2003. Miami also has the NBA's ultimate 'tweener, Dwyane Wade, at shooting guard. Wade was the fifth pick in 2003 but would have gone higher if not for the what-is-he? question. On the eve of that draft, the *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote: "The knock on Wade is that he's a 'tweener, measuring in at the dreaded hoops height of 6-4. No one knows if he's a shooting guard or a point guard."

Dreaded hoops height? Not with these teams. "We have players who maybe don't fit the traditional way of doing things," says Howard. "But we have a great coaching staff that can find out what our strengths are and focus on bringing them out. Some people might look at it like a negative, you know, talk about what you can't do. But here, they talk about what you can do."

Think Howard would be passed up 28 times if he entered the draft again?

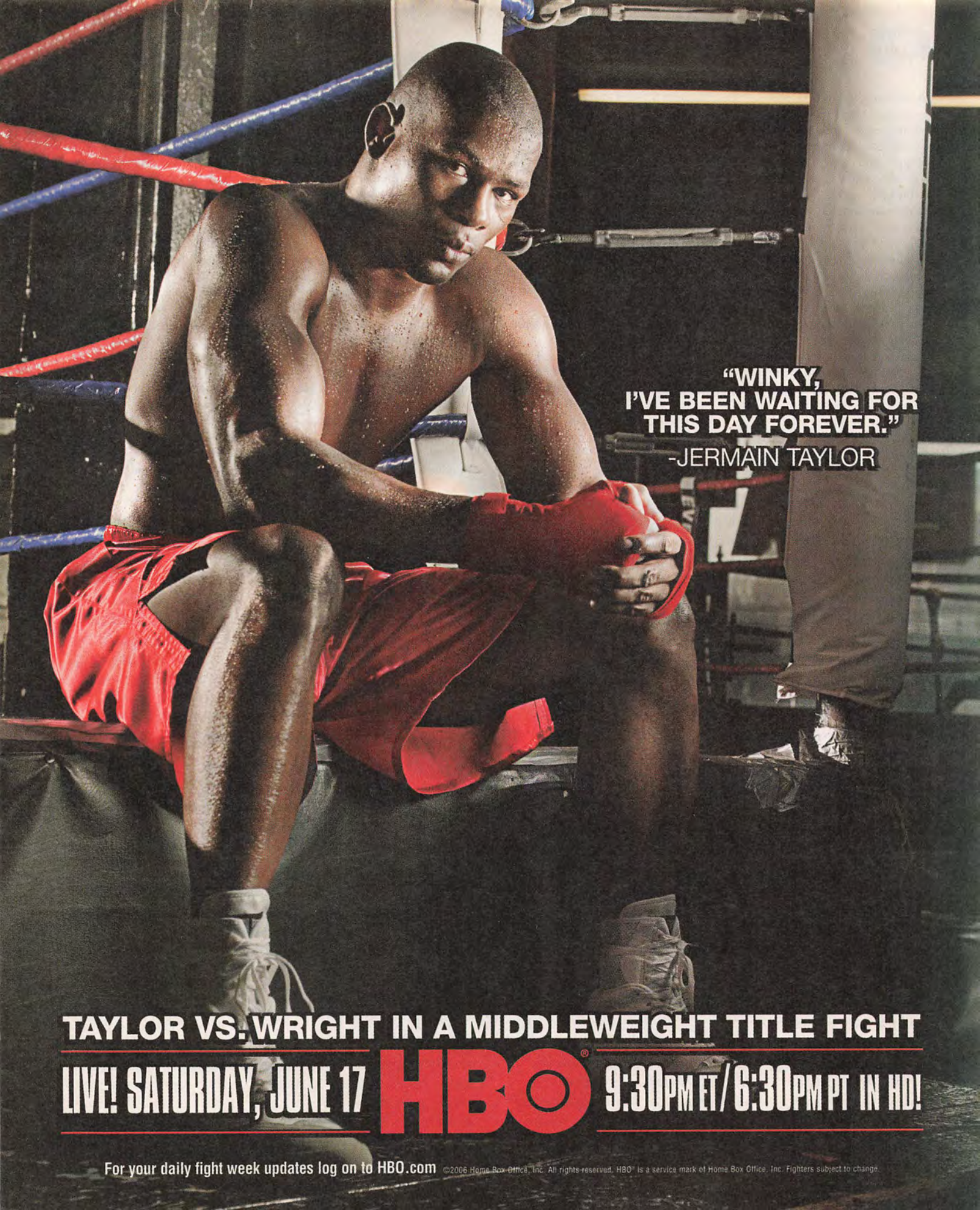
That was especially evident in Terry's performance, which is a credit to Johnson. Miami focused much of its defensive energy on Nowitzki in Game 1. That strategy left Terry with his choice of shots, and he employed the same quick trigger that once was viewed as such a negative. Johnson spent much of last summer stressing that to Terry—when Terry struggled, Johnson noticed it was because of indecisiveness. It was as if Terry still was hearing voices from Atlanta telling him to act like a traditional point guard, and he made mistakes because of it. So Johnson put together several pancake powwows with Terry over the summer and discussed his play over breakfast. Terry visited Johnson in Houston and accompanied him to Las Vegas for summer league games. It was, Terry says, the most offseason time he ever spent with a coach.

And the message from Johnson was the opposite of what every other coach had told him: *You're a 'tweener. That's not going to change. Now go be the best 'tweener you can be.*

"We tried to get him in the position of trying to play like Jason Terry and not like a traditional point guard," Johnson says. "Be a point guard who uses your strengths that really fit this team. He's come a long way. And we've only been together a year and a half. I think there is another level for us to go up."

The level Walker was trying to get to was down a few notches—belt notches, that is. As a power forward, Walker has maintained some extra girth to help him deal with bigger players. But when he was acquired by the Heat last summer in a sign-and-trade with Boston, Riley made it clear that, though the Heat would use Walker as a power forward, he primarily would be a small forward and needed to be in small forward shape. So Walker hit the treadmill and the salad bar and lost 15 pounds. "They told me right away that I would have to be chasing around a lot of those small forwards," Walker says. "I knew I was not going to be able to do that with the body I had."

Walker made himself, physically, into the player he'd always been mentally. Throughout his career, especially


"WINKY,
I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR
THIS DAY FOREVER."
-JERMAIN TAYLOR
TAYLOR VS. WRIGHT IN A MIDDLEWEIGHT TITLE FIGHT
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in Boston (the Jim O'Brien years excluded), Walker was harangued for eschewing his back-to-the-basket game in favor of quick and often ill-advised 3-pointers. Now he is encouraged to be a perimeter shooter, to replace the outside scoring Miami gave up when it traded Eddie Jones and let Damon Jones leave as a free agent. It's a 'tweener's dream come true. "That's the good thing about it," says Walker, who is averaging 6.7 3-point attempts in the playoffs and making 34.7 percent of them. "I came here and they want me to just play my game and be myself."

Of course, the 'tweener life has its pitfalls, as Miami found out in The Finals' first two games. Walker shot 7-for-19 in the opener. Before Haslem's injury, it was clear his size disadvantage against Nowitzki would be costly—Nowitzki outscored Haslem, 42-10, and outrebounded him, 26-10. Wade shot 38.6 percent in the two games, slowed by the combination of players who defended him—Adrian Griffin, Howard, Jerry Stackhouse, Daniels and, occasionally, Devin Harris. Only Harris (6-3) is shorter than Wade.

Still, these Finals are 'tweener-heavy, and the rest of the league takes notice of the Finalists' blueprints. This is how trends are born. But the successful dalliances in 'tweener players the Heat and Mavericks have had won't set off some new trend—rather, they're the result of trends that already have arisen from the NBA's tinkering with defensive rules over the past few years. The league has added zone defenses to encourage ball movement and limited defensive contact on the perimeter to enhance player movement.

"With the rules now being the way they are, there is a bigger premium on versatility and players who maybe don't fit the traditional mold," says Mavericks assistant Del Harris. "Now, everyone would love to have a Shaq if there were 30 of them. But there aren't, so more teams are finding ways to win by emphasizing what their players do best rather than saying, 'Point guard, shooting guard, forward,' and so forth. You have to be much more open-minded in how you see your players."

This is not to say you can't teach an old 'tweener new tricks. Terry, even with his shooting directive from Johnson, still knows how to pass, as he showed in Game 2 when Miami was determined to contest his shots. Stackhouse (19 points) was Dallas' surprise scorer in that game, and Terry fed him with assists on two long jumpers. With 3:30 to play in the first half, Terry embarrassed Miami's aggressive close-outs. He took a pass from Nowitzki, rose to shoot, saw Haslem leave Nowitzki and changed his plans—zipping a pass to Nowitzki for an easy layup.

"Coach wants me to be aggressive with my shooting," Terry says. "I know I can still set up the offense, get us into our sets and make passes when I need to. But I have to maintain my aggressiveness first. That's my game and I have to stick with it."

Yes, stick with your game. Just as any good 'tweener should. **SN**

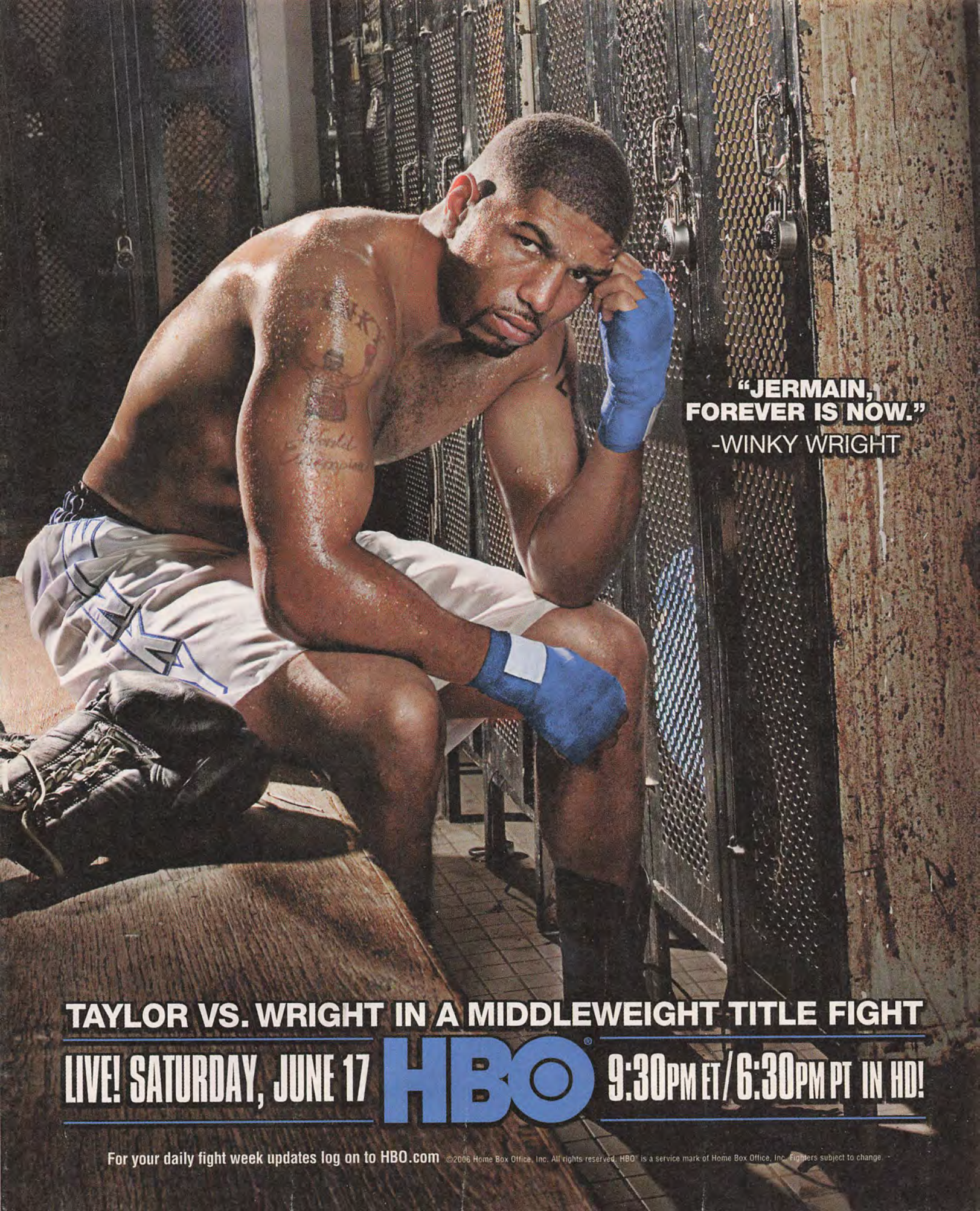
FINALS DISH

An Eastern Conference general manager says there won't be a market for free-agent Mavericks PG **Jason Terry** in the offseason—but not because Terry isn't a desired commodity. "Everyone is assuming he is staying with Dallas and that they'll get it done quickly," the G.M. says. But, he adds, "Everyone thought that with **Steve Nash**, too." Terry's agent is **Dan Fegan**, known around the league as a tough negotiator, but Fegan has worked well with Mavs owner **Mark Cuban** before—on the deal that brought C **Erick Dampier** to the Mavericks.

> Heat SG **Dwyane Wade** denied the flu that had been with him since the end of the conference finals affected him in Game 1, but his play suggested otherwise. Wade was 6-for-7 in the opening quarter and 5-for-18 the rest of the game. Funnyman **Mo Rocca**, working for a late-night television show, suggested to Wade that he claim he actually had the bird flu, which would keep defenders away. "I don't think I'm going to do that," Wade said. > Once again, the Hawks deserve credit for helping a Finals team—first it was for sending PF **Rasheed Wallace** to Detroit 2½ years ago, now it is for handing Terry to Dallas (oddly, the trade was for Heat PF **Antoine Walker**) a few months later. What's more, not only did the Hawks give the Suns PF **Boris Diaw** (Atlanta's 2003 first-round pick) last summer, but Diaw was not the player the Hawks were expected to draft that year. Mavericks F **Josh Howard** was. On the eve of that draft, the Mavs were so certain the Hawks would take Howard that they were working on a trade to move ahead of Atlanta. > Miami gets to the free throw line often because opponents have little choice but to foul when trying to stop Wade and C **Shaquille O'Neal**. The Heat's supporting cast must do a better job of driving to the rim and drawing fouls, which would help Miami force foes into the penalty earlier in quarters. Wade is shooting 9.3 free throws per game in the playoffs, and O'Neal is shooting 7.9. PF **Udonis Haslem** is next at 2.8. "We need to be more aggressive in attacking the rim," Walker says.

Stackhouse can shoot, but he doesn't *have to* shoot.

> Mavericks SG **Jerry Stackhouse** bristles at the notion that he was selfish early in his career. "People would get on me because I was out trying to score 30 points a game," he says. "Look at the teams I was on. I had to score 30." Before coming to Dallas, Stackhouse's teams had a combined record of 287-416 (.408). > Mavericks assistant **Del Harris** was the coach of the Lakers when O'Neal signed with L.A. in 1996. Harris foresees the big guy sticking around for many more years: "He is more economical now. He's like a veteran baseball pitcher who has learned how to be crafty. He does not have to strike you out on every pitch." Harris, by the way, says he won't coach in the 2008 Olympics. He coached China in 2004.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MLB

A SPORTING NEWS SPECIAL REPORT

Summer's game

In baseball you find the pulse of summer. As June melts toward July, the game's beat grows strong. The major leagues settle into a rhythm unbroken till fall. And Barry Bonds and Jason Grimsley be damned—minor leagues still thrive, college baseball still marches toward Omaha, kids still tee it up and grown-ups still play by olden rules.

Our team of talented photographers discovered that pulse as they scattered like hits across a spray chart to capture a celebration of baseball. Over a three-week span, they moved from the game's cathedrals to its open-air chapels and back again.

They found in small moments summer's game, played on the biggest stages (such as Milwaukee's Miller Park, right) as well as lighted grass fields dotting cityscapes and diamonds of dirt no different from the roads that lead to them.

Soon enough, our new national pastime, the NFL, will take center stage again, when training camps open.

But at the end of June, there is only one game, our game. And it is baseball.

COME CELEBRATE IT WITH US.

Photo by Jay Drowns

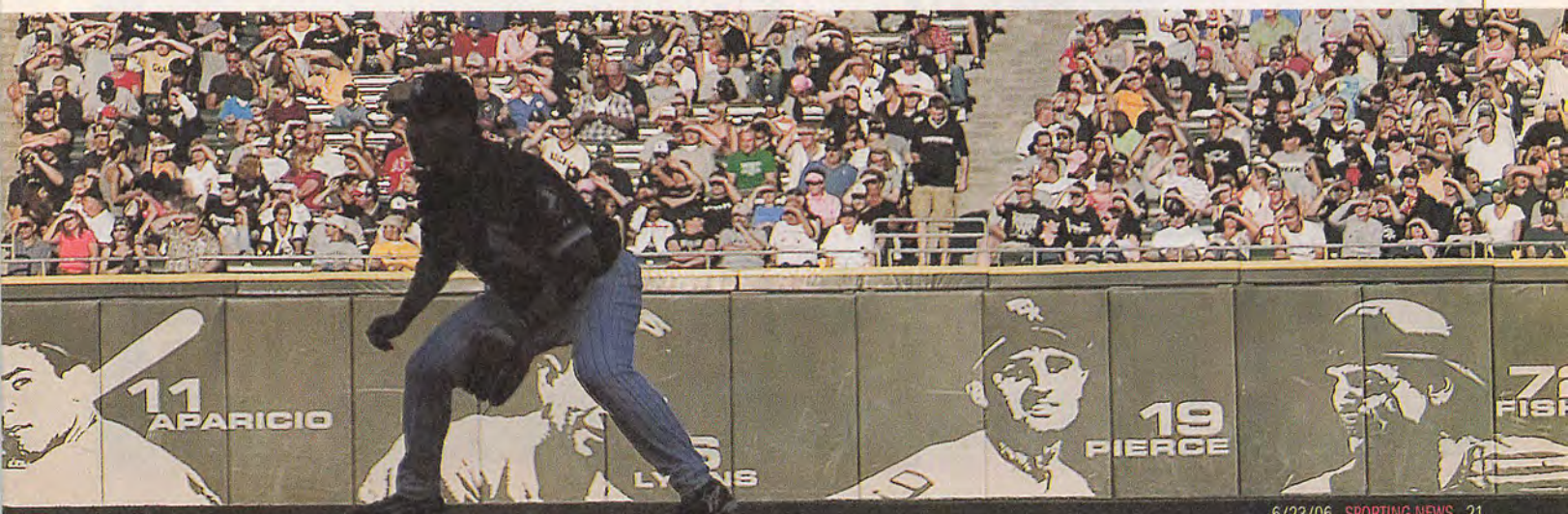
JENKINS
SCHUEM
21

CHICAGO • 6/3/06 • The couple requests the pleasure of your company at their wedding on Saturday, the third of June, in their home at 333 W. 35th St. Old Styles in plastic cups to follow on the Upper Reserved level. (The bride is registered in the A.L. Central.)

CHICAGO • 5/20/06 • It's a simple game: You throw the ball, you catch the ball, you hit the ball. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, sometimes you try to beat the living crap out of your crosstown rival.

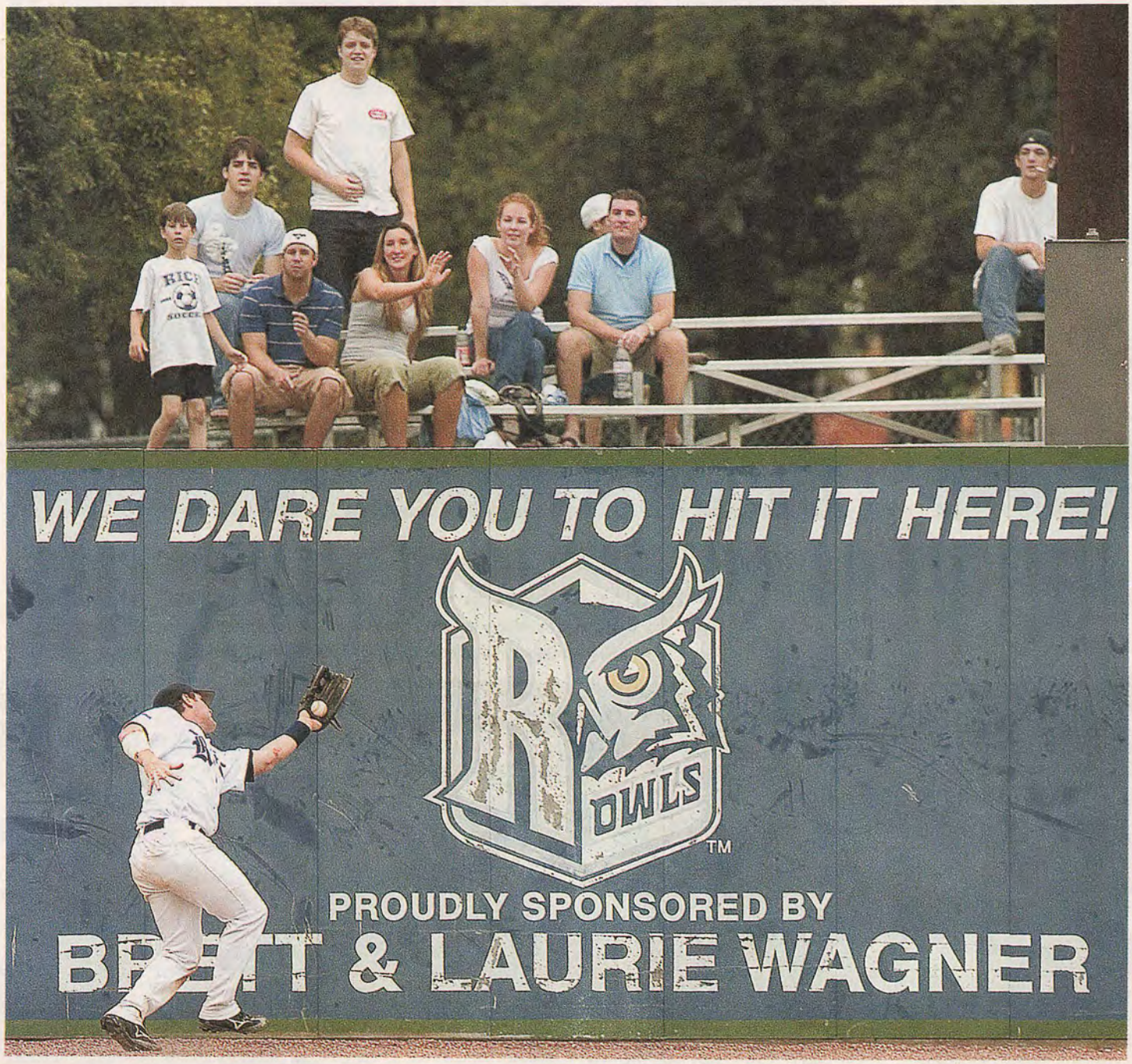
Photos by
Jay Drowns

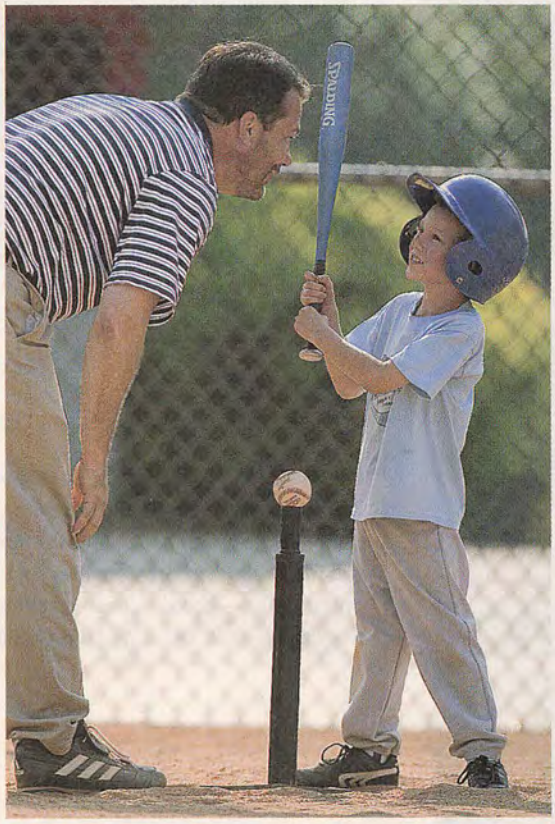
CHICAGO • 6/3/06 • From Nellie to Minnie, Luis to Pudge, a Wall of Fame's worth of greats have worn the White Sox uniform. One thing separates that group from those who play before their watchful eyes: the words *world champions.*



Photos by
Robert Seale

HOUSTON • 5/28/06 • **OK, some people can't resist a dare—such as the University of Houston hitter who nearly went deep against crosstown rival Rice. Owls outfielder Aaron Luna made it worth the price of a ticket—several tickets, in fact.**





ROCK HILL, S.C. • 5/24/06 • It's baseball by the numbers on the last day of league play in the Upper Palmetto YMCA's Slugger Ball Coach-Pitch/T-ball: It takes three to field, two to tee it up, one to slug it.

Photos by Bob Leverone

HOBART, IND. • 5/21/06 •
Only at a vintage base ball (two words, please) game—teams such as the Midway Marauders and the Deep River Grinders play by 19th century rules—can the sneered taunts get this vicious: Your son wears a batting helmet!

Photos by Jay Drowns

The bad news:

This blackout could last a while.

The good news:

This blackout could last a while.

Don't let erectile dysfunction (ED) hold you back from a fulfilling sexual relationship.

- Viagra is prescribed for all degrees of ED, even if it only happens once in a while.
- Maintaining an erection is important. It's just as important as getting a firm erection. Viagra can help with both.
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What are you waiting for?

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VIAGRA is prescribed to treat erectile dysfunction. We know that no medicine is for everyone. If you use nitrate drugs, often used for chest pain (known as angina), don't take VIAGRA. Taking these drugs together could cause your blood pressure to drop to an unsafe level.

Talk with your doctor first. Make sure you are healthy enough to have sex. If you have chest pain, nausea, or other discomforts during sex, seek medical help right away.

Although erections lasting for more than four hours may occur rarely with all ED treatments in this drug class, to avoid long-term injuries, it is important to seek immediate medical help.

In rare instances, men taking PDE5 inhibitors (oral erectile dysfunction medicines, including VIAGRA) reported a sudden decrease or loss of vision. It is not possible to determine whether these events are related directly to these medicines or to other factors. If you experience sudden decrease or loss of vision, stop taking PDE5 inhibitors, including VIAGRA, and call a doctor right away.

The most common side effects of VIAGRA are headache, facial flushing, and upset stomach. Less common are bluish or blurred vision, or being sensitive to light. These may occur for a brief time. Remember to protect yourself and your partner from sexually transmitted diseases.

Please see our patient summary of information for VIAGRA (25 mg, 50 mg, 100 mg) tablets on the following page.

VIAGRA is available on most Managed Care Plans.* VIAGRA is one of several ED treatments that you and your doctor can consider.

*Percent of members by formulary status for HMOs, PPOs and POS for Viagra. Formulary Compass™ MediMedia USA, Inc. May 2006.

To learn more, visit viagra.com or call 1-888-4VIAGRA (1-888-484-2472)

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PATIENT SUMMARY OF INFORMATION ABOUT VIAGRA®

(sildenafil citrate) tablets

This summary contains important information about VIAGRA®. It is not meant to take the place of your doctor's instructions. Read this information carefully before you start taking VIAGRA. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you do not understand any of this information or if you want to know more about VIAGRA.

This medicine can help many men when it is used as prescribed by their doctors. However, VIAGRA is not for everyone. It is intended for use only by men who have a condition called erectile dysfunction. **VIAGRA must never be used by men who are taking medicines that contain nitrates of any kind, at any time. This includes nitroglycerin. If you take VIAGRA with any nitrate medicine your blood pressure could suddenly drop to an unsafe or life threatening level.**

• What Is VIAGRA?

VIAGRA is a pill used to treat erectile dysfunction (impotence) in men. It can help many men who have erectile dysfunction get and keep an erection when they become sexually excited (stimulated).

You will not get an erection just by taking this medicine. VIAGRA helps a man with erectile dysfunction get an erection only when he is sexually excited.

• How Sex Affects the Body

When a man is sexually excited, the penis rapidly fills with more blood than usual. The penis then expands and hardens. This is called an erection. After the man is done having sex, this extra blood flows out of the penis back into the body. The erection goes away. If an erection lasts for a long time (more than 6 hours), it can permanently damage your penis. You should call a doctor immediately if you ever have a prolonged erection that lasts more than 4 hours.

Some conditions and medicines interfere with this natural erection process. The penis cannot fill with enough blood. The man cannot have an erection. This is called erectile dysfunction if it becomes a frequent problem.

During sex, your heart works harder. Therefore sexual activity may not be advisable for people who have heart problems. Before you start any treatment for erectile dysfunction, ask your doctor if your heart is healthy enough to handle the extra strain of having sex. If you have chest pains, dizziness or nausea during sex, stop having sex and immediately tell your doctor you have had this problem.

• How VIAGRA Works

VIAGRA enables many men with erectile dysfunction to respond to sexual stimulation. When a man is sexually excited, VIAGRA helps the penis fill with enough blood to cause an erection. After sex is over, the erection goes away.

• VIAGRA Is Not for Everyone

As noted above (*How Sex Affects the Body*), ask your doctor if your heart is healthy enough for sexual activity.

If you take any medicines that contain nitrates – either regularly or as needed – you should never take VIAGRA. If you take VIAGRA with any nitrate medicine or recreational drug containing nitrates, your blood pressure could suddenly drop to an unsafe level. You could get dizzy, faint, or even have a heart attack or stroke. Nitrates are found in many prescription medicines that are used to treat angina (chest pain due to heart disease) such as:

- nitroglycerin (sprays, ointments, skin patches or pastes, and tablets that are swallowed or dissolved in the mouth)
- isosorbide mononitrate and isosorbide dinitrate (tablets that are swallowed, chewed, or dissolved in the mouth)

Nitrates are also found in recreational drugs such as amyl nitrate or nitrite ("poppers"). If you are not sure if any of your medicines contain nitrates, or if you do not understand what nitrates are, ask your doctor or pharmacist.

VIAGRA is only for patients with erectile dysfunction. VIAGRA is not for newborns, children, or women. Do not let anyone else take your VIAGRA. VIAGRA must be used only under a doctor's supervision.

• What VIAGRA Does Not Do

- VIAGRA does not cure erectile dysfunction. It is a treatment for erectile dysfunction.
- VIAGRA does not protect you or your partner from getting sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV — the virus that causes AIDS.
- VIAGRA is not a hormone or an aphrodisiac.

• What To Tell Your Doctor Before You Begin VIAGRA

Only your doctor can decide if VIAGRA is right for you. VIAGRA can cause mild, temporary lowering of your blood pressure. You will need to have a thorough medical exam to diagnose your erectile dysfunction and to find out if you can safely take VIAGRA alone or with your other medicines. Your doctor should determine if your heart is healthy enough to handle the extra strain of having sex.

Be sure to tell your doctor if you:

- have ever had any heart problems (e.g., angina, chest pain, heart failure, irregular heart beats, heart attack or narrowing of the aortic valve)
- have ever had a stroke
- have low or high blood pressure
- have a rare inherited eye disease called retinitis pigmentosa
- have ever had any kidney problems
- have ever had any liver problems
- have ever had any blood problems, including sickle cell anemia or leukemia
- are allergic to sildenafil or any of the other ingredients of VIAGRA tablets
- have a deformed penis, Peyronie's disease, or ever had an erection that lasted more than 4 hours
- have stomach ulcers or any types of bleeding problems
- are taking any other medicines

• VIAGRA and Other Medicines

Some medicines can change the way VIAGRA works. Tell your doctor about **any medicines** you are taking. Do not start or stop taking any medicines before checking with your doctor or pharmacist. This includes prescription and nonprescription medicines or remedies:

- Remember, VIAGRA should never be used with medicines that contain nitrates (see *VIAGRA Is Not for Everyone*).
- If you are taking alpha-blocker therapy for the treatment of high blood pressure or prostate problems, you should not take a dose of greater than 25 mg of VIAGRA at the same time (within 4 hours) as you take your dose of alpha-blocker.
- If you are taking a protease inhibitor, your dose may be adjusted (please see *Finding the Right Dose for You*).
- VIAGRA should not be used with any other medical treatments that cause erections. These treatments include pills, medicines that are injected or inserted into the penis, implants or vacuum pumps.

• Finding the Right Dose for You

VIAGRA comes in different doses (25 mg, 50 mg and 100 mg). If you do not get the results you expect, talk with your doctor. You and your doctor can determine the dose that works best for you.

- Do not take more VIAGRA than your doctor prescribes.
- If you think you need a larger dose of VIAGRA, check with your doctor.
- VIAGRA should not be taken more than once a day.

If you are older than age 65, or have serious liver or kidney problems, your doctor may start you at the lowest dose (25 mg) of VIAGRA. If you are taking protease inhibitors, such as for the treatment of HIV, your doctor may recommend a 25 mg dose and may limit you to a maximum single dose of 25 mg of VIAGRA in a 48 hour period. If you are taking alpha-blocker therapy, you should not take a dose of greater than 25 mg of VIAGRA at the same time (within 4 hours) as your dose of alpha-blocker.

• How To Take VIAGRA

Take VIAGRA about one hour before you plan to have sex. Beginning in about 30 minutes and for up to 4 hours, VIAGRA can help you get an erection if you are sexually excited. If you take VIAGRA after a high-fat meal (such as a cheeseburger and french fries), the medicine may take a little longer to start working. VIAGRA can help you get an erection when you are sexually excited. You will not get an erection just by taking the pill.

• Possible Side Effects

Like all medicines, VIAGRA can cause some side effects. These effects are usually mild to moderate and usually don't last longer than a few hours. Some of these side effects are more likely to occur with higher doses. The most common side effects of VIAGRA are headache, flushing of the face, and upset stomach. Less common side effects that may occur are temporary changes in color vision (such as trouble telling the difference between blue and green objects or having a blue color tinge to them), eyes being more sensitive to light, or blurred vision.

In rare instances, men have reported an erection that lasts many hours. You should call a doctor immediately if you ever have an erection that lasts more than 4 hours. If not treated right away, permanent damage to your penis could occur (see *How Sex Affects the Body*).

Heart attack, stroke, irregular heart beats, and death have been reported rarely in men taking VIAGRA. Most, but not all, of these men had heart problems before taking this medicine. It is not possible to determine whether these events were directly related to VIAGRA.

VIAGRA may cause other side effects besides those listed on this sheet. If you want more information or develop any side effects or symptoms you are concerned about, call your doctor.

• Accidental Overdose

In case of accidental overdose, call your doctor right away.

• Storing VIAGRA

Keep VIAGRA out of the reach of children. Keep VIAGRA in its original container. Store at 25°C (77°F); excursions permitted to 15-30°C (59-86°F) [see USP Controlled Room Temperature].

• For More Information on VIAGRA

VIAGRA is a prescription medicine used to treat erectile dysfunction. Only your doctor can decide if it is right for you. This sheet is only a summary. If you have any questions or want more information about VIAGRA, talk with your doctor or pharmacist, visit www.viagra.com, or call 1-888-4VIAGRA.

Pfizer

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September 2002

Photo by Jay Drowns

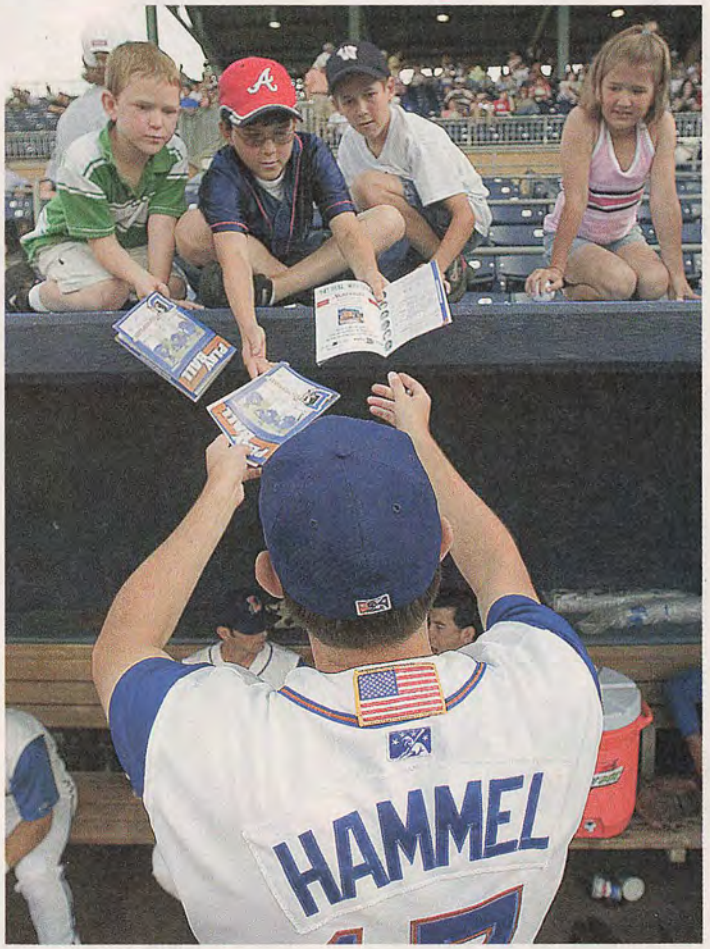
CHICAGO • 5/17/06 •
Good news: The rain to disdain fell mainly in Des Plaines. Bad news: Enough hit nearby Wrigleyville to bring out the squeegee squad.

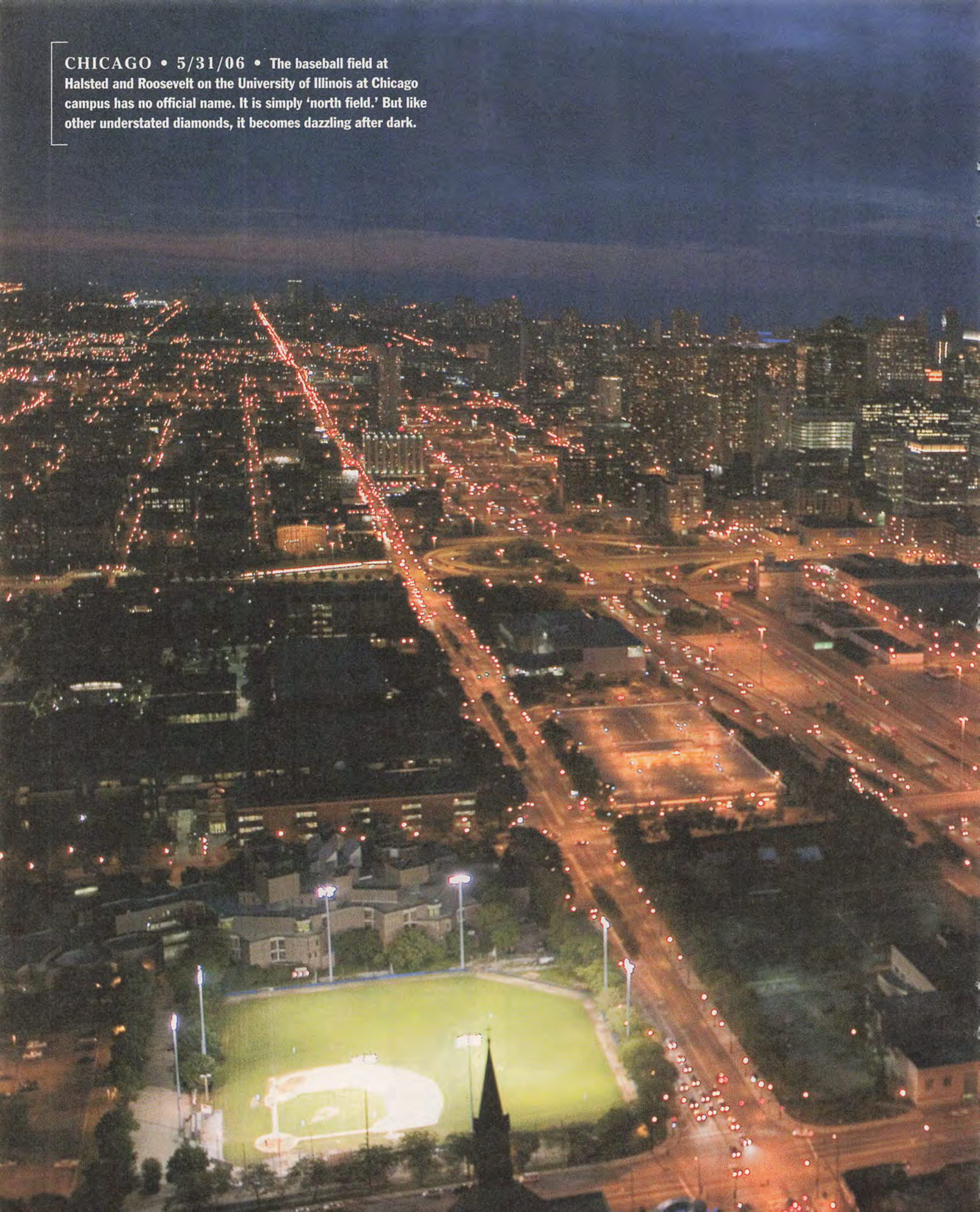
LEXINGTON, KY. • 6/6/06 • Even legends—suited up with an aptly named team—have to rehab in the bushes when they've been away from the bigs for more than seven months. And just think, someday Jonah Dixon, 8, of the Southwest Lexington Reds will be able to say he was on the mound with Elle, Big L, Pee-Wee and, oh, yeah, some old dude named Clemens.

Photos by
Bob Leverone

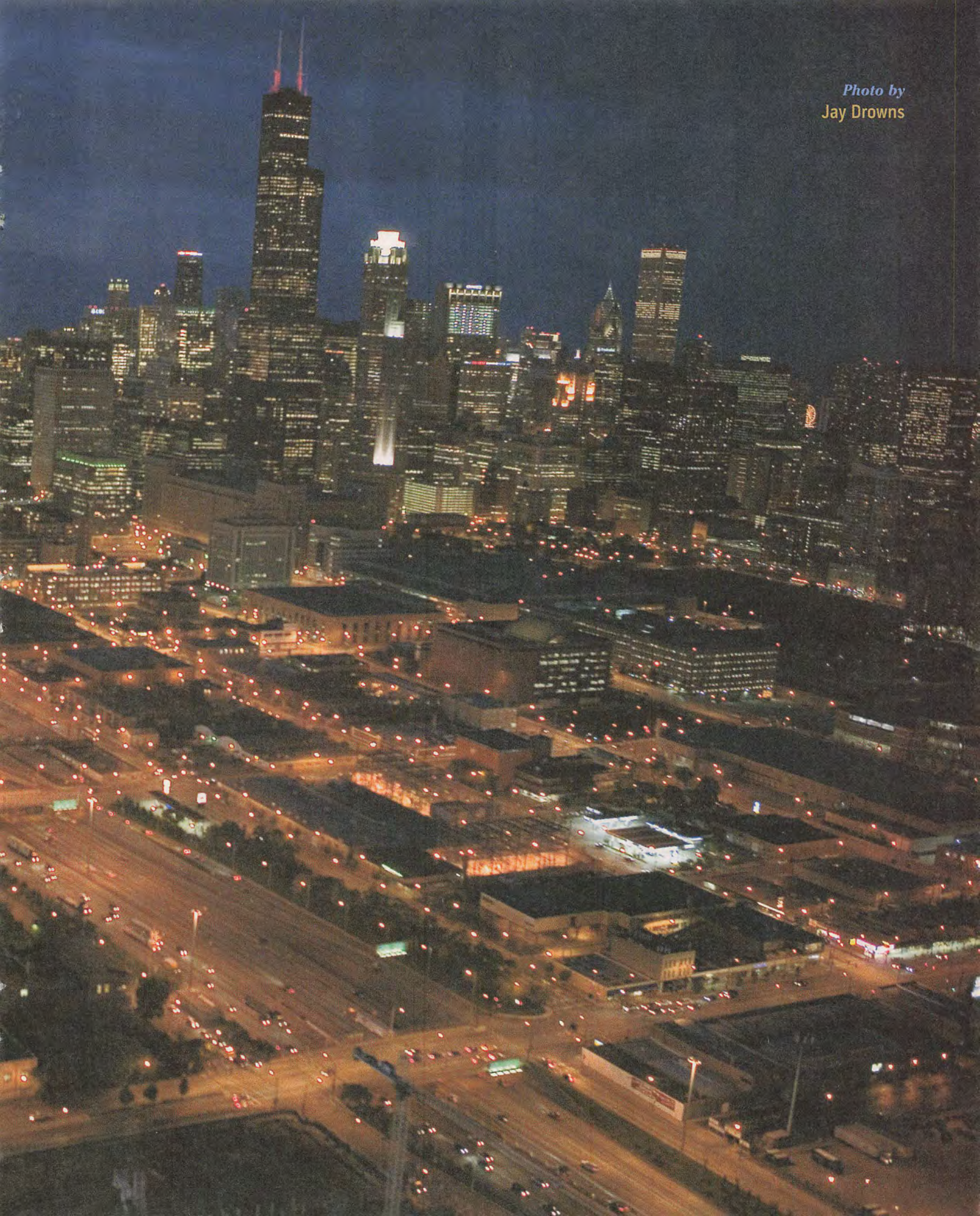
DURHAM, N.C. • 5/28/06 • The sacks are 90 feet apart, but when you're a kid going from home to first, they're a world away from a reserved seat at Durham Bulls Athletic Park, where pregame autographs are still easy to come by (always say *please* and *thank you*, even in the minors).

Photo by Robert Seale





CHICAGO • 5/31/06 • The baseball field at Halsted and Roosevelt on the University of Illinois at Chicago campus has no official name. It is simply 'north field.' But like other understated diamonds, it becomes dazzling after dark.



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Sporting News

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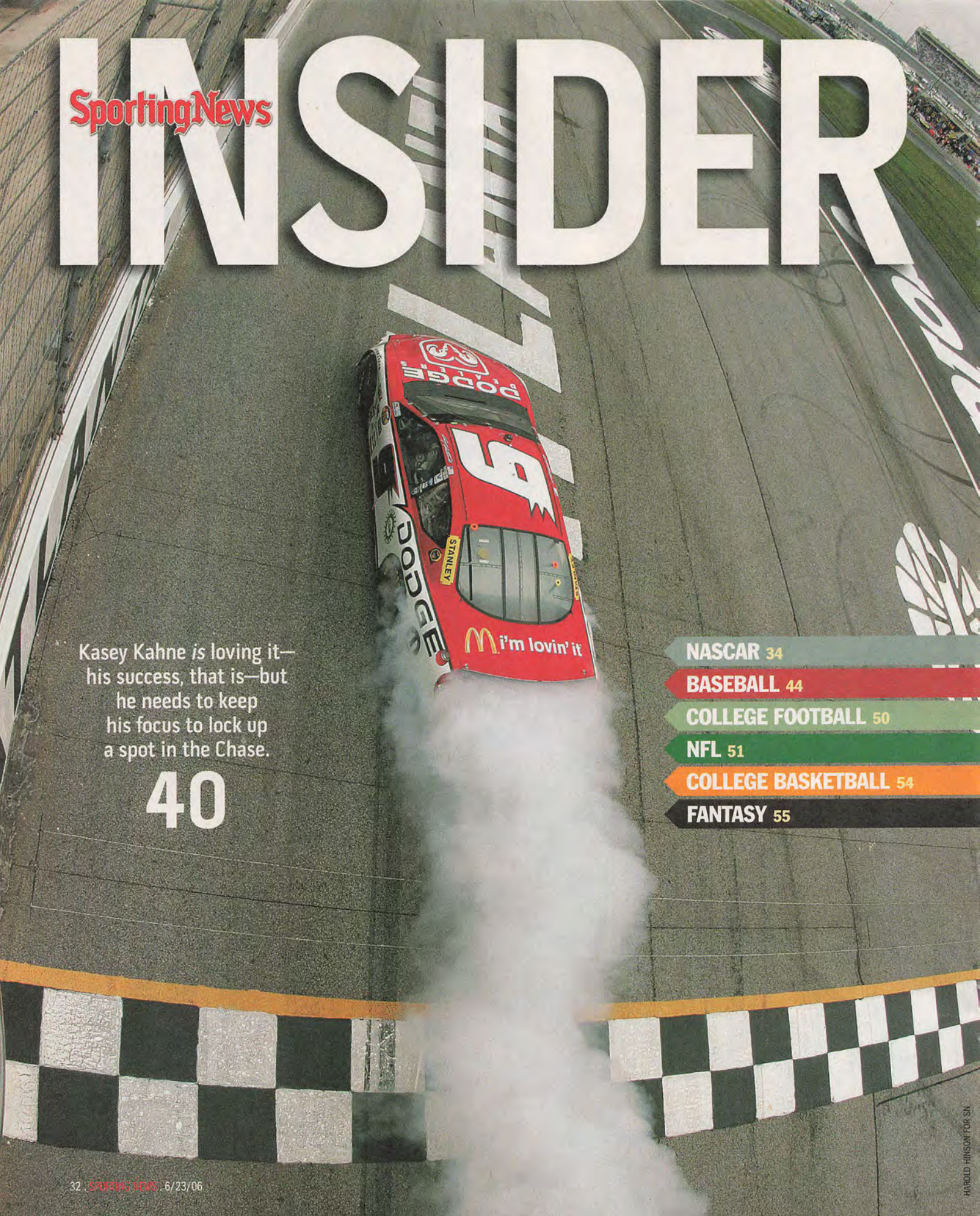

Kasey Kahne *is* loving it—his success, that is—but he needs to keep his focus to lock up a spot in the Chase.

40

NASCAR 34
BASEBALL 44
COLLEGE FOOTBALL 50
NFL 51
COLLEGE BASKETBALL 54
FANTASY 55

HAROLD HINSON/FOR SN

Darrell Waltrip 11
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INSIDER LEE SPENCER

lspencer@sportingnews.com

Memo to Jimmie Johnson: Yes, that is Matty K. in your rearview mirror, and he's not going away soon.

The Cheeseheads stand alone

What can you say about a driver who is so damn dominant that NASCAR had to change its points system to protect the other competitors?

A lot when that driver is Matt Kenseth. Kenseth isn't flashy or flamboyant. He doesn't race to buy a bigger vacation house or a faster jet. He'd rather spend his down time in his native Wisconsin than on a St. Barths beach. He races for the sheer joy of competition. And, he races to win.

Kenseth practically coasted to the 2003 championship, topping the standings after a record 33 consecutive races and eventually finishing 90 points ahead of Jimmie Johnson. When NASCAR introduced the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup in 2004, Kenseth entered the postseason fifth and finished eighth, the third straight season Kenseth finished in the top 10.

Shame on the idiots who counted Kenseth out last season after he finished 42nd in the Daytona 500 and didn't finish two more of the first 12 races. Kenseth's No. 17 team dropped to 24th after 14 races, but Kenseth and the Killer Bees went on a tear in the next 14 races—they won once and finished in the top five seven times and squeezed into the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup.

But that run took its toll. A roller-coaster Chase performance—six finishes in the top fives and three of 26th or worse—resulted in a seventh-place finish.

The 2006 season has been different. He has improved his qualifying considerably in the last two seasons. This year, he has an average starting position of 15.4, and he has led laps in all but three races. After his Daytona dogfight with defending series champion Tony Stewart—and 15th-place finish—Kenseth has not been lower than third in points.

Much of the team's success comes from the core relationship between Kenseth and crew chief Robbie Reiser. Reiser's selflessness led him to step out from behind the wheel of his family's Busch ride in 1997 and plug Kenseth, a 25-year-old fellow Cheesehead, in the car. The combination is the longest tenured in the Nextel Cup garage and shows no signs of getting stale.

As with any marriage, Kenseth and Reiser have experienced their ups and downs, but their personal agendas never have outweighed their desire to race.

Their dedication to racing—and each other—is what separates this team from the rest of the field and what will make Kenseth a contender for many years. **SN**

ERIK PEREL FOR SN

Kenseth and his team know how to win—races and championships.

TAKE5

Best paint schemes

BOB LEVERONE / SN

1 Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s No. 8 Budweiser Chevy. Simplicity is best in advertising, and Budweiser gets its name across in its classic cursive white lettering. And who doesn't love red cars?

2 Casey Mears' No. 42 Havoline Dodge. Though Scott Riggs' Valvoline Dodge looks nearly as good, the red and white star on Mears' hood is the clincher. Too bad Mears isn't running near the front enough.

3 Jimmie Johnson's No. 48 Lowe's Chevy. The silver and blue scheme is sharp, and the yellow 48 sure stands out.

4 J.J. Yeley's No. 18 Interstate Batteries Chevy. What's the first thing you think of when you see lime green? If it's not sherbet, I bet it's Interstate Batteries.

5 Kasey Kahne's No. 9 Dodge Dealers Dodge. The 9 and the 19 often were identical twins until this season. The addition of white on the side panels of Kahne's car looks great. *—Roger Kuznia*

speedreads

Is Penske Racing simply out to lunch? Heads will roll when the Captain comes out of his milk-induced Indy coma and realizes neither of his Nextel Cup cars is in the top 10.

The current testing policy prohibits drivers from working on their weak tracks, so kudos to Cup teams circumventing the rules by testing Busch cars at Infineon Raceway.

I'm just not feeling the love for Kevin Grubb. Is NASCAR the new MLB—drivers can use and abuse and still be welcomed back? Or is NASCAR just that desperate for Busch drivers?

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INSIDE DISH

Chip Ganassi says he's disappointed but not surprised that **Casey Mears** announced last week he would not return to the team. "We're not at the level we need to be," Ganassi says. In 2007 Ganassi says he will field three Nextel Cup teams, but he isn't sure who will drive the No. 42 Dodge. One name that has been mentioned is Indy 500 runner-up **Marco Andretti**, 19, who races for his father, **Michael**, at Andretti Green Racing. Marco is a grandson of **Mario Andretti**, the first driver who won both the Indy 500 and the Daytona 500. > Mears is expected to replace **Brian Vickers** in the No. 25 Hendrick Motorsports Chevy. Neither Mears nor Vickers has won a Cup race. Mears would go from being the alpha dog at Ganassi to the bottom of the pecking order at Hendrick, where he'll be behind four-time Series champion **Jeff Gordon**, current points leader **Jimmie Johnson** and 2005 Rookie of the Year **Kyle Busch**, who has two Cup victories. > The No. 24 team will have to step it up or Gordon will be watching the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup from outside the top 10 again. Mechanical problems have plagued this team all season; a brake failure did in Gordon at Pocono. Gordon's 34th-place finish knocked him out of the top 10 in points. He's 11th, 25 points out of 10th and 501 behind Johnson. > **Kevin Harvick**'s crew chief, **Todd Berrier**, isn't looking just to maintain the car's position in the Chase—he wants the team to race its way into the lead. For the second consecutive week, he's taking Happy and the boys to test at Virginia International Raceway, a road course. Berrier says the team "hit on some things" during the first test with teammates **Jeff Burton** and **Clint Bowyer** and hopes to improve the car this week before the first road race of the season, June 25 at Infineon Raceway. All three Joe Gibbs Racing teams also are expected to test at VIR this week as well. > Race fans signed petitions last weekend to keep both races at Pocono Raceway. There have been rumors that Speedway Motorsports Inc. chairman **Bruton Smith** wants to buy a race from Pocono or Dover and move the date to Las Vegas. One way for Pocono to improve its chances might be cutting its races to 400 miles.

HAROLD HINSON FOR SN

Brian Vickers had better hope the grass is greener on the other side of the garage. *Green* will be the operative word if Vickers accepts the Toyota Red Bull ride, as he is expected to do. This is a drivers market with a lot more seats than there are qualified competitors. That's why drivers such as Vickers, who has yet to win a Cup race, can demand multimillion-dollar contracts. Vickers has to ask himself whether he can wait two years for Toyota to get up to speed. The next big question: Where will Toyota find enough engineers who can double as crew chiefs?

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Pit Box: Who will win at Michigan?

Fantasy experts Vinnie Iyer and Roger Kuznia pick Nextel Cup winners. Follow their running feud at sportingnews.com/nascar/pitbox.

Roger: Picture it: Brooklyn, Mich. June 18, 2006. Confetti is in the air, fans are on their feet, and President Bush is dialing into **Jeff Burton**'s Cingular wireless phone to offer congratulations to a 38-year-old driver who hasn't won since 2001. Burton continues to show signs of his and Richard Childress Racing's renaissance, and this track is where Burton seals the deal. He finished fifth at California—a track similar to Michigan—earlier this season. Eat my rubber, Vinnie. You'll lose again.

Sleeper pick: Scott Riggs.
Avoid at all costs: Dale Jarrett.

Vinnie: Roger, I would rather pick a guy who actually has a chance of winning this year. Thanks for opening the door for me to get right back into our version of the Chase, and **Greg Biffle**, who has two victories in only six starts at Brooklyn, is the ideal pick. You can go with RCR, but Michigan has been more like the House of Roush. Get ready to hear some "Hail to the Victors" when Biffle's crew wins. With No. 31, you've just dialed the wrong number.

Sleeper pick: Joe Nemechek.
Avoid at all costs: Jeff Green.

Nextel Cup points (based on how the experts' choices finished): Roger 911, Vinnie 831.

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2006

New York Magazine
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Popular Science
"20 Seriously Hot Products"
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Car and Driver
1st Place
"Ultra Performance Tire Test"
2005

Eurotuner Magazine
"2005 Overall Winner"
2005

#1 Ultra Performance Tire
by leading consumer product
magazine - 2003

Consumers Digest
"Best Buy"
2003

Automotive News
"PACE Award Finalist"
2003

Popular Mechanics
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2003

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2006

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magazine - 2005

R&D Magazine
"R&D 100 Award"
2005

Business Week
"Silver IDEA Award"
2005

Popular Mechanics
"Editor's Choice Award"
2004

Automotive News
"PACE Award Finalist"
2004

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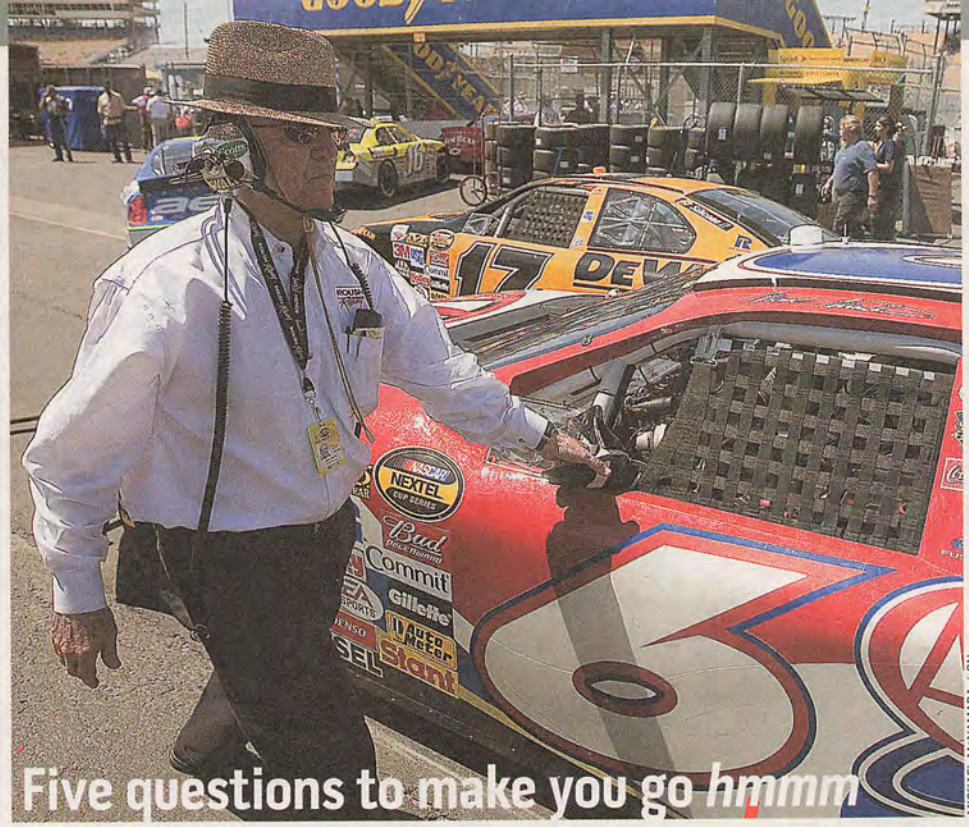
ON THE WINGS OF

GOODYEAR®

HALF AND HALF

With the regular season just past the midway point, the cream has risen to the top—but plenty of guys in sweet rides stand ready to get in the mix

By Lee Spencer



MICHAEL MCNAMARA / SN

Five questions to make you go *hmmm*

1 Can all five of **Jack Roush**'s teams squeak into the Chase again?

2 Rookies Denny Hamlin and Clint Bowyer have stolen the spotlight. Will any of the other freshmen emerge?

3 Toyota still must fill its roster. Will the Japanese automaker wreak havoc on existing teams by hiring away drivers and crew members?

4 Will the double duties of Cup drivers also competing in the Busch Series become too taxing in the noncompanion events?

5 How much of an advantage will teams chosen for Goodyear tire tests have over the field?

And the Anna Kournikova award goes to ... Jamie McMurray

Hey, pretty boy, the "I can't drive these cars" excuses might have worked at Ganassi Racing, but they won't fly at an organization that has won two of the past three championships. All five Roush teams qualified for the Chase last year—including yours. Now you have Jack Roush's favorite new crew chief. Get up on the wheel and stay there.

Treacherous tracks that could turn the tide

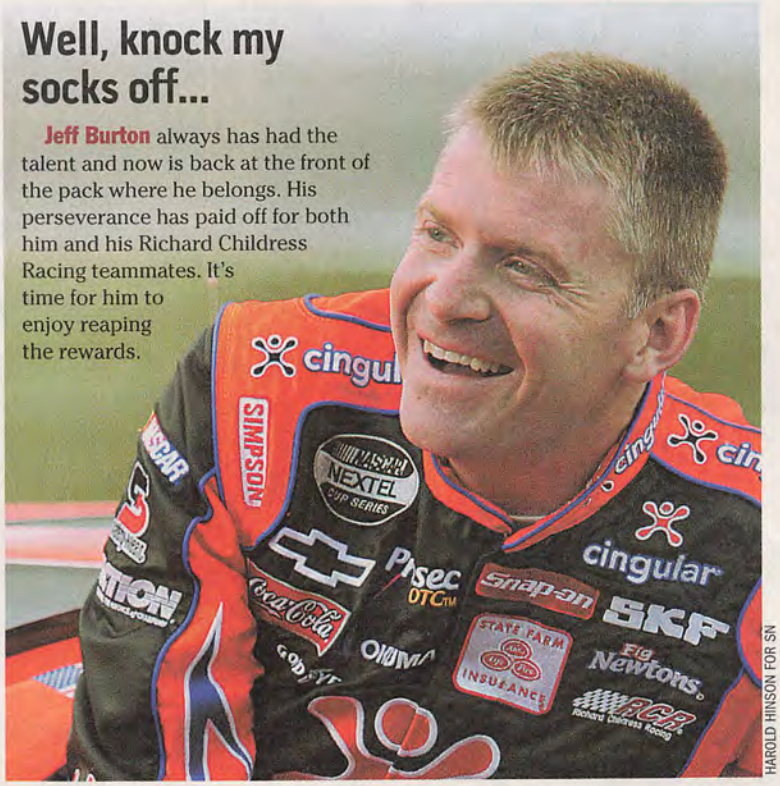
Bristol and Daytona. Anything can happen and usually does.

Watkins Glen and Infineon. Versatility will separate racers from riders.

Michigan, Pocono and California. It's not good enough to have a fast car—you have to have one that goes the distance without puking out.

Well, knock my socks off...

Jeff Burton always has had the talent and now is back at the front of the pack where he belongs. His perseverance has paid off for both him and his Richard Childress Racing teammates. It's time for him to enjoy reaping the rewards.



HAROLD HINSON FOR SN

 MCMURRY BY ALAN MARLER FOR SN, KOURNIKOVA BY RENZO GOSTOLI / AP, ILLUSTRATION BY JACK KRUYNE / SN

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Neil Bonnett walks away with the winner's trophy at the Pontiac® 400 in Richmond. Helping him to the podium was Valvoline.

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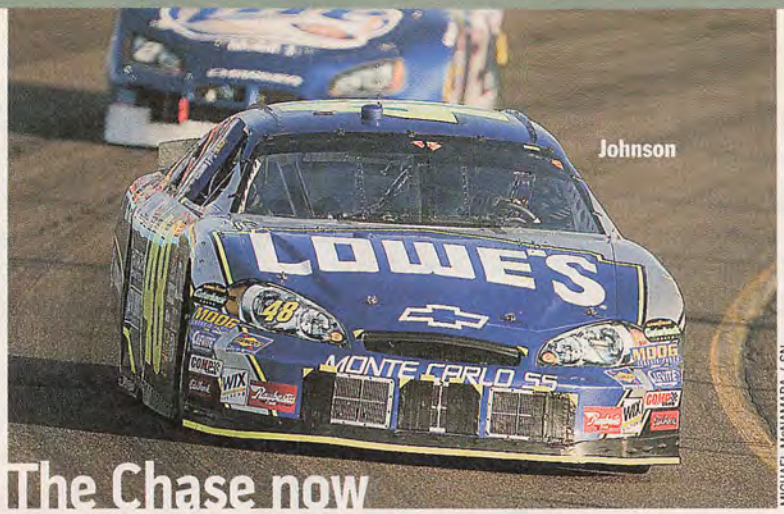


Johnson

MICHAEL McNAMARA / SN

The Chase now

If the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup started today, only the top 10 drivers would have a shot at the title because no other driver is within 400 points of the leader. But it doesn't start today, so there is plenty of time for new folks to slide in.

1 Jimmie Johnson. J.J. has been there, done that. Since entering the series in 2002, Johnson and the No. 48 crew have finished every season in the top five in points but always have fallen just short of winning the trophy. How do they turn their luck around? Crew chief Chad Knaus says the team must pace itself through the summer stretch so it is ready to attack in the Chase. Johnson will be in the championship mix come Homestead. Count on it.

2 Matt Kenseth. The Killer Bees are back and ready to sting the competition. With Kenseth's current position in points, the team won't have to push itself as hard to make the Chase as it did last season. That will put it in a stronger position once the Chase starts.

3 Mark Martin. If there's one driver who never gives up, it's Martin. And he always has been consistent. But since Roush Racing and Robert Yates Racing merged their engine programs heading into the 2004 season, Martin has been near the top of his game.

4 Tony Stewart. What's a broken scapula to a two-time champ? Though Smoke will be quite sore for a while, he'll be ready to rumble come September. Crew chief Greg Zipadelli's leadership has kept this crew focused, and the team works well with Jason Shapiro in the car chief slot. It's hard to believe this group is stronger than it was last season, but with all three Joe Gibbs Racing teams on the same page, benefits abound.

5 Kasey Kahne. Things finally have fallen into place for Kahne and team director Kenny Francis. This team went to the Chase with Jeremy Mayfield last year, so if Kahne keeps his focus through the summer months the No. 9 Dodge will be a lock for the Chase.

6 Dale Earnhardt Jr. The separation of Earnhardt and crew chief Tony Eury Jr. at the start of 2005 made the cousins appreciate each other more when they were reunited. Each once questioned the other's commitment, but now the lifelong friends realize how well they complement each other. After ending up an embarrassing 19th in points last season, the No. 8 brew crew will be disappointed with anything less than a podium finish.

7 Jeff Burton. Burton has been missing in action the past few years but has revived his career at Richard Childress Racing. Burton and engineer/crew chief Scott Miller are a match made in racing heaven.

8 Kevin Harvick. This could be Happy's season—if he doesn't self-destruct. At times, the No. 29 car appears destined for greatness. No one can question crew chief Todd Berrier's dedication. If he harnesses Harvick's energy and directs it into racing cars, the No. 29 will be a force to reckon with week in and week out.

9 Denny Hamlin. After Hamlin's strong showing in a limited run last year, it was easy to predict he would be the top finishing rookie and the first to win a race. Driving equipment equal to the defending champ's, Hamlin's future is now.

10 Kyle Busch. Twenty-five points. The penalty for his *faux pas* at Charlotte could be the difference between Rowdy rocking into the Chase and watching the postseason from the sideline. He has the talent, but he doesn't always learn from experience and sometimes leaves his maturity in the garage.

Lies, damn lies and predictions

JOHN GODBEY / AP

Because SPORTING NEWS endeavors always to bring you superlative analysis and predictions—especially the predictions—we scientifically drew names out of a sombrero from a bad Mexican restaurant as part of our preseason picks-for-the-Chase package. Humans second-guess themselves all the time, so we gave the hat a do-over, too—this time using only drivers currently ranked first through 22nd (Matt Kenseth's position after 13 races in 2005, after which he stormed into the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup).

New picks

1. Ryan Newman
2. Casey Mears
3. Matt Kenseth
4. Jamie McMurray
5. Kyle Busch
6. Dale Jarrett
7. Kasey Kahne
8. Reed Sorenson
9. Dale Earnhardt Jr.
10. Carl Edwards

Preseason picks

1. Elliott Sadler
2. Clint Bowyer
3. Dave Blaney
4. Bobby Labonte
5. Denny Hamlin
6. Carl Edwards
7. Kurt Busch
8. Jeremy Mayfield
9. Jeff Gordon
10. Jeff Burton

The Chase later

The top six are locks, but after that anyone could fall out. So who might jump in?

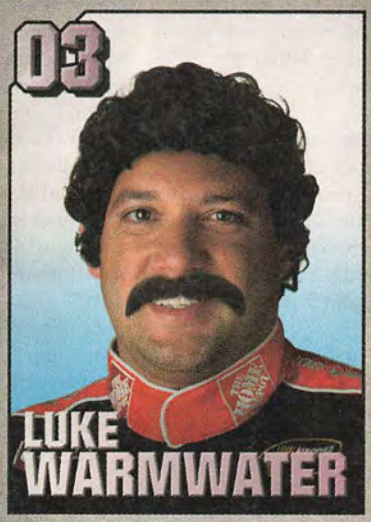
Greg Biffle is the most likely to steal a spot, followed by Carl Edwards. Jeff Gordon could climb back in, but his cars have been unreliable. SN

POWERADE®

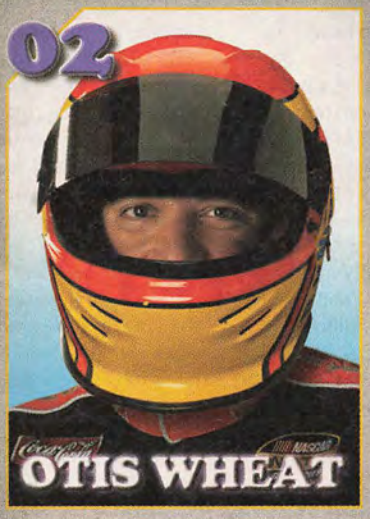
FUTURE STARS OF RACING

MIKEY FEDORCAK, JR. – MIDGET CAR: *This Knaw Bone, Indiana, native won the 2005 Rumble in Ft. Wayne. Chew on that.*

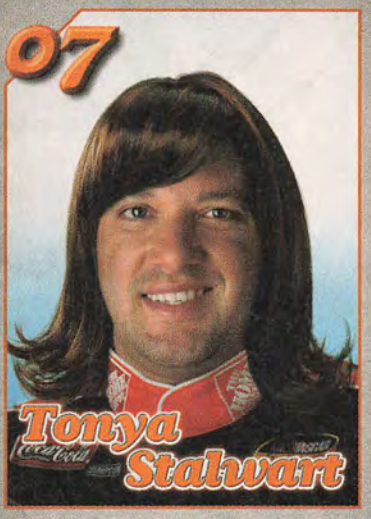
SMOKE JOHNSON – MIDGET CAR: *With a name like "Smoke," you can't lack confidence–he already challenged Tony "Smoke" Stewart to a swamp-buggy race.*



LUKE WARMWATER – MONSTER TRUCK: *Get out of the way, here comes Luke. He likes big trucks and big cats. This eccentric driver from Texas wants a pet tiger.*



OTIS WHEAT – KART DRIVER: *His favorite winning tradition: climb the fence after a victory. His favorite POWERade flavor: Orange.*



TONYA STALWART – SPRINT CAR: *This fiery redhead turns heads on the track. Watch out, Tony. She says if she catches you, she gets to keep you.*

SPORT IS WHAT YOU MAKE IT™

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INSIDER MIKE BERARDINO

This talented rookie has learned to finish what he no longer starts.

The Red Sox are closing on a high note

About the only thing that hasn't been consistent for Jonathan Papelbon this year has been his entrance music.

Papelbon, the rookie closer for the Red Sox, started with "Bodies" by Drowning Pool and its lyrics, "Let the bodies hit the floor." But he moved on to AC/DC and more recently has settled on "The Enemy" from Boston's own Godsmack.

"I've changed it like six times," Papelbon says. "I'll just change it from time to time, just out of curiosity."

Considering Papelbon began the year with 20 straight save conversions, this could be viewed as sheer lunacy. After all, closers have used theme songs as a huge part of their arsenals since Trevor Hoffman started strolling in from the San Diego bullpen to the peals of "Hells Bells."

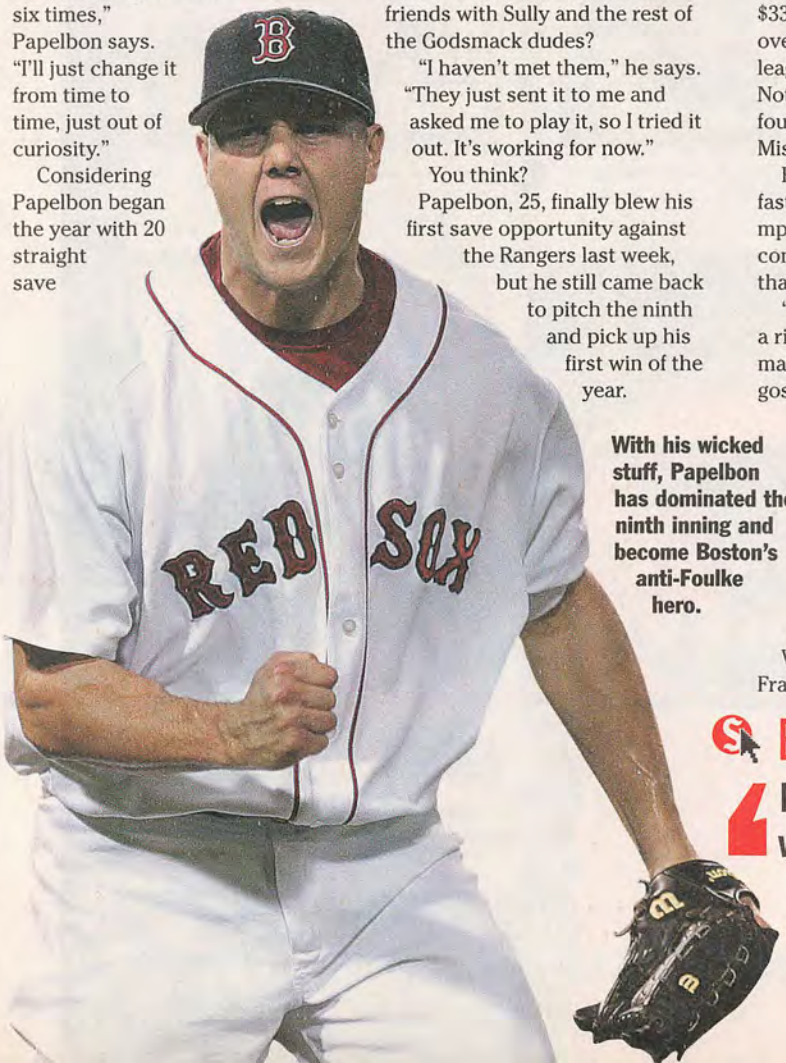
Would Mariano Rivera or Billy Wagner dream of giving up "Enter Sandman" after all the saves that have followed that Metallica ditty?

Did Papelbon make his latest switch because he has become friends with Sully and the rest of the Godsmack dudes?

"I haven't met them," he says. "They just sent it to me and asked me to play it, so I tried it out. It's working for now."

You think?

Papelbon, 25, finally blew his first save opportunity against the Rangers last week, but he still came back to pitch the ninth and pick up his first win of the year.



With his wicked stuff, Papelbon has dominated the ninth inning and become Boston's anti-Foulke hero.

CHARLES KRUPA / AP

In his first 29 outings, Papelbon had an ERA of 0.30. That's not an ERA; that's a blood-alcohol level at spring break.

In 30⅓ innings, Papelbon allowed 15 hits. He had 31 strikeouts against four walks. Righthanders hit .085 against him, lefties .193.

Not a bad return for a kid making $335,400, a shade over the major league minimum. Not bad for a fourth-round pick out of Mississippi State in 2003.

Papelbon features a fastball that often hits 96 mph, a vicious slider that comes in at 89 and a split-finger that dives at 90.

"He was nasty when I saw him," a rival scout says. "If he can maintain what he's doing, my gosh, he could be a monster closer for a lot of years."

Papelbon has made everyone forget the continuing woes of deposed closer Keith Foulke. It hardly matters anymore that Foulke is making $7.25 million to be a setup man.

What is manager Terry Francona's confidence level when he hands the ball to Papelbon?

"It's been pretty good since his first day," Francona says. "(Otherwise) we wouldn't have put him where he is. He understands his role and being accountable every day."

Red Sox right fielder Trot Nixon says Papelbon's teammates appreciate his low-key approach and that he hasn't let his ego rage out of control.

"He doesn't go up there thinking he's the greatest thing since sliced bread," Nixon says. "He's having an extremely good year, but it hasn't gone to his head at all."

Indeed, Papelbon quickly deflects credit to his teammates, especially catcher Jason Varitek. "He's reassuring," Papelbon says.

speedreads

Entering the week, the Marlins, Indians and Royals were the only teams with save percentages below 50 percent. Not coincidentally, they also were a collective 46 games under .500.

ELAINE THOMPSON / AP

Three times in a span of two starts, Twins rookie lefty **Francisco Liriano** tried to snare a batted ball with his pitching hand. The club kindly asked him to refrain from this activity.

Just two teams have managed to use the same five starting pitchers all year. Not that it has meant much in the standings for the Mariners and Pirates.

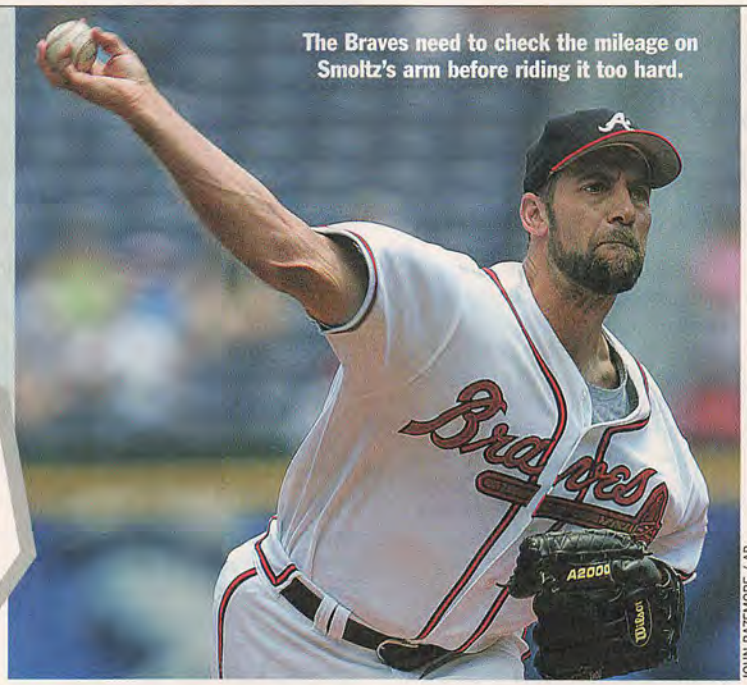
BLOG ALERT

"More than wanting to know who's cheating, I'd like to know with certainty who isn't."

Stan McNeal comes clean with his thoughts on baseball at sportingnews.com.

Braves RHP **John Smoltz** recently made his second start of the season on three days' rest, which seems a dangerous tactic considering he is 39 and has a surgically repaired elbow. But Smoltz was 1-1 with a 2.77 ERA in those outings, and he has had five starts with at least one day of extra rest.

> INSIDE DISH



The Braves need to check the mileage on Smoltz's arm before riding it too hard.

JOHN BAZEMORE / AP

In the wake of the federal drug raid on **Jason Grimsley**'s house, Major League Baseball says it will commit an unspecified amount of funding toward in-house efforts to create a reliable urine test for human growth hormone. In addition, MLB says it would like to enter a joint initiative with the NFL, NBA and NHL to find a testing solution before this wildfire rages out of control. > If a seasonlong supply of HGH costs just $3,200, as Grimsley allegedly told federal investigators, it's obvious why athletes are using the hard-to-detect substance. Not just in baseball, but in all sports at all levels. If Grimsley, 38, was willing to use HGH to extend a career that would have paid him $825,000 this year, what about those who stand to earn millions by milking another year or two from their fading talent? What about minor leaguers who are making $800 a month and are desperate to reach the majors? > Some American League team should make a deal for Rockies late bloomer **Ryan Shealy**, who could be moved for a young arm. Entering the week, the Twins had not gotten a home run from the DH slot, so they would be a logical fit. Shealy, 26, is tearing up the Pacific Coast League again, but there's no room for him in the Rockies' lineup because **Todd Helton** plays first base. A previous attempt to convert Shealy into a left fielder flopped. > Where would the pitching-starved Giants be if they hadn't traded for C **A.J. Pierzynski** after the 2003 season? Pierzynski was cut loose by the Giants after one year, and the three arms they gave up in the deal now are integral parts of the Twins' staff: All-Star closer **Joe Nathan** and young starters **Francisco Liriano**, a lefthander, and **Boof Bonser**, a righthander. Credit Twins G.M. **Terry Ryan** with that major heist. > With Liberty Media in line to purchase the Braves from AOL/Time Warner, G.M. **John Schuerholz** is expected to stay on for three more years. Manager **Bobby Cox** would remain for at least that long as well. Smart move. Chasing them off would be no way to maintain a dynasty. > Contenders already are eyeing the Nationals as the primary sellers in the early trading season. Scouts indicate that other teams expect the Nationals to listen to offers for everyone except closer **Chad Cordero** and 3B **Ryan Zimmerman**. > Has any young pitcher made bigger strides in the past few years than Phillies RHP **Brett Myers**? Says one rival scout: "He's 25, and he already has (46) wins. What's he going to get when he hits the free-agent market?" Good news for the Phillies: That can't occur until after the 2008 season. > **Eric Gregg**, who died of a stroke at age 55, was one of the umpires who never was rehired after a resignation strategy backfired in 1999. He was the second black umpire to work a World Series (1989), and he will be remembered for his gregariousness. Says veteran umpire **Joe West**: "He died with a broken heart because his career was taken away from him, but he left this world with a smile on his face and everyone else's that he touched in his life. I'm going to miss him."

"To learn from a guy like that and to start your career off with a catcher like that has been a blessing for me. I'll give him credit for a lot of my success. I'm not afraid to admit that."

Varitek says Papelbon's experience as a starter helped him master all his pitches and learn the importance of getting ahead in the count. Even with touted closer prospect Craig Hansen knocking on the door, Papelbon's starting days are over for now.

"I loved him as a starter," Varitek says, "and he's doing an awesome job as our closer."

Now if he could just settle on that entrance music. **SN**

Baseball fantasy owner

Mark Cuban's Dallas Mavericks, who have just made their first trip to the NBA Finals, are a cutting-edge organization in virtually every category.

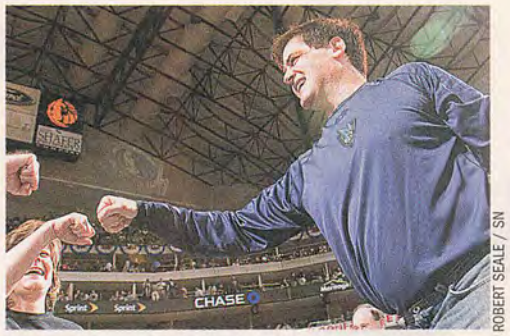
Could Cuban soon bring his brand of ownership to Major League Baseball?

"I've said all along if the Pirates or Cubs became available, I'd consider it," Cuban says. "I grew up in Pittsburgh, and the Cubs are so iconic. But it's not something I'm actively pursuing. It's not like the Mavericks were when it was 'I need to go get that team.' "

Despite steady rumors out of Pittsburgh about his buying the Pirates from Kevin McClatchy, Cuban says, "There's never been a formal discussion" between him and any baseball people.

What are the chances Cuban will join the baseball fraternity within, say, the next five years?

"I'd say the chances are probably 99 percent that I won't," he says. "It's just the nature of the beast. Not a lot of turnover. Not a lot of people looking to sell."



ROBERT SEALE / SN

Baseball is a long shot for Cuban, but wouldn't it be a load of fun?

Too bad. Imagine how much fun it would be watching Cuban battle Bud Selig the way he does NBA commissioner David Stern.

THE CLOSER Todd Jones

Ordering bats is a big hit with pitchers who rarely get to use them

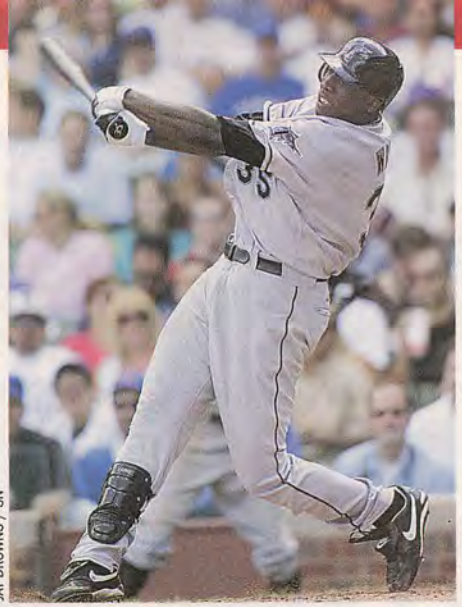
Bud Selig's idea for interleague play, now in its 10th season, was a good one. Those few weeks this time of year break up the season for the players and, for the fans, take advantage of geographical rivalries between the two leagues. Interleague is not perfect—for example, how many fans care about this month's Pirates vs. Royals series?—but for the most part, it has worked fine.

There is one change I'd like to see: Let's use National League rules in American League parks and vice versa. It would be cool to see a pitcher hit in Yankee Stadium or to watch an A.L. lineup with its DH make a run at those lofty offensive numbers that we're used to seeing at Coors Field.

Though pitchers can't hit, especially those in the American League who rarely get the chance, there's still one cool thing about being an American League pitcher during interleague: We get to order bats, and you should see us order bats. There are so many choices. Cupped bats. Non-cupped bats. Triple-dipped bats (to make them harder). Bats with small handles. Bats with big handles. Black bats. Rose bats. Plain bats. Two-tone bats.

And here's the skinny on pitchers' bat orders: Everybody wants the style that is used by their team's best hitter. So if Pudge Rodriguez is using a Louisville Slugger C271 cupped black bat, the majority of bat orders by Tigers pitchers are for Louisville Slugger C271 cupped black bats.

There's always a new guy who will take six or seven different bats to the cage to try them out.



JAY DROWNS / SN

Then after he breaks every single one, he comes in with a straight face and places his order. He'll place this fancy order like C271 31-ounce, 32.5-inch black triple-dipped cupped bat with a two-tone finish. You know, the ones with the black barrel and natural handle.

Of course, when interleague comes around and he gets in the box and sees a cutter or curve coming at him for the first time, all those measurements and that triple dip become useless. Most pitchers can't hit. For every Willis is dangerous with the stick; most other pitchers are a danger to themselves.

Dontrelle Willis, there are 49 pitchers who are absolutely convinced they can hit. But once they get in the box, that hanging curve they saw in high school isn't there. You quickly realize you're a pitcher and now all you want to do is not look stupid and/or get hurt. You take your three cuts and hope you don't pull a back muscle.

But, hey, you've got your cupped C271 to set on your mantel, and you can tell your buddies at the next Christmas party how close you were to taking, oh, let's say, Jason Schmidt deep.

Yeah, keep telling yourself that.

Todd Jones is a reliever for the Tigers. E-mail him at tjones@sportingnews.com.

rain-X presents Dream week

June 15-21

THURSDAY, 6/15
Mets at Phillies

FRIDAY, 6/16
Blue Jays at Marlins

SATURDAY, 6/17
Tigers at Cubs

SUNDAY, 6/18
Yankees at Nationals

MONDAY, 6/19
A's at Rockies

TUESDAY, 6/20
Diamondbacks at Devil Rays

WEDNESDAY, 6/21
Cardinals at White Sox

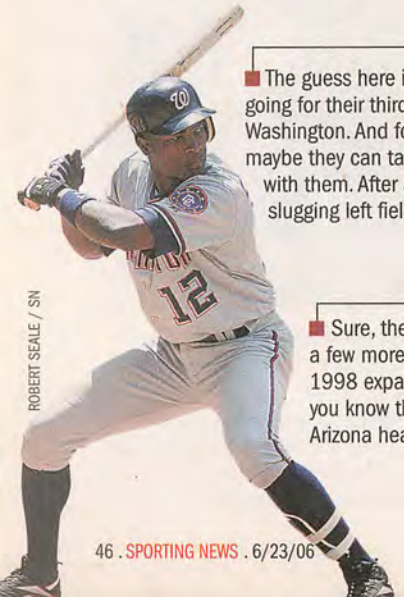
■ The last time the Mets came to Philly, the big story—other than the nonstory of Billy Wagner's not getting into a game—was **Aaron Rowand** breaking his nose after crashing into the center field wall while robbing Xavier Nady of a hit. And how's this for timing: Nady could be activated from the D.L. and ready to test Rowand again.

H. RUMPH JR. / AP

■ A.J. Burnett isn't scheduled back until next week, thus spoiling the highly anticipated reunion duel between him and a bunch of guys whom he never played with but now are donning the same jersey he used to wear.

DUANE BURLESON / AP

■ Scheduled to toe the Wrigley rubber is the Tigers' **Justin Verlander**, a tall, BB-throwing phenom with a sky's-the-limit future—assuming he stays away from Cubs pitching coach Larry Rothschild.



ROBERT SEALE / SN

■ The guess here is the Yankees will be going for their third straight Dubya in Washington. And for their parting gift, maybe they can take **Alfonso Soriano** with them. After all, they could use a slugging left fielder.

■ These teams have similar records but could be headed in opposite directions. The Rockies-as-contenders concept appears to be fading into thin air; the A's are just about ready for their annual transformation from punching bag to heavyweight.

■ Sure, the Diamondbacks have had a few more high points than their 1998 expansion brethren, but did you know the D-Rays absolutely own Arizona head to head (3-0 lifetime)?

■ The Sox's probable starter is Mark Buehrle, who was a huge Cardinals fan growing up in the St. Louis area. You know who else loves the Cards? **Jim Thome**. His numbers in 26 games vs. STL: .420 average, 16 homers, 37 RBIs. *—Kyle Veltrop*

JAY DROWNS / SN

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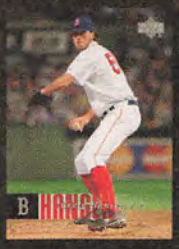

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SPOTLIGHT: TOP DRAFT CHOICES

SCOTT AUDETTE / AP

The D-Rays were thrilled to scoop up Longoria, who topped their board.

ANGELS Hyun Choi **Conger** has played other positions but will stay at catcher for now. Conger, a power-hitting high school player, isn't expected to make it to the majors until 2009 at the earliest. ... **ATHLETICS** RHP **Trevor Cahill**'s heat can reach 95 mph; he also throws an 80-mph curveball and a good changeup and knuckle-curve. He has good command but lacks experience and probably is at least three years away from the majors. ... **BLUE JAYS** High school OF **Travis Snider** impressed the team with his solid swing mechanics, power potential and patience at the plate. His strong arm likely will land him a job in right field in the minors, where he'll probably develop for the next four to six years. ... **DEVIL RAYS** Long Beach State 3B **Evan Longoria** has solid all-around skills and power. He probably will start at Class A Visalia, where he also will play second base and shortstop. If he develops as expected, he'll be the Rays' third baseman by the end of the 2008 season. ... **INDIANS** Though he doesn't light up the radar gun, UCLA LHP **David Huff** knows how to work the strike zone and has four pitches. He could reach the majors in '08 or '09. ... **MARINERS** Although he also has experience as a reliever, Cal RHP **Brandon Morrow** will begin his pro career as a starter. His pitches have been clocked as high as 99 mph, and he could join the Mariners as early as 2008. ... **ORIOLES** Power-hitting high school IF **Billy Rowell** will move from shortstop to third base in the pros; he has good hands but suspect range. It could take him four years to reach the bigs. ... **RANGERS** High school LHP **Kasey Kiker** will provide the club with three above-average pitches: a fastball that reaches 93 mph, a curve and a changeup. He likely will reach the majors by 2010. ... **RED SOX** **Jason Place**, a high school player, projects as a left or right fielder, but he probably is four to five years away from making an impact in the majors. Place, a righthanded hitter, has good power and speed, as well as a strong arm and good instincts in the outfield. ... **ROYALS** Projected as a future No. 1 starter, RHP **Luke Hochevar** has a sinking fastball that tops out at 97 mph and a slider, curveball and changeup. Hochevar, who pitched at Tennessee, most recently played with the Fort Worth Cats of the independent American Association. He likely will get a spring training invitation in 2007, though there's a chance he could be called up this September. ... **TIGERS** The team has enough pitching depth to wait until 2008 to bring up North Carolina LHP **Andrew Miller**. He has a mid-90s fastball with good movement and a sharp slider, but the readiness of his changeup is questionable. ... **TWINS** Power was the main reason the club selected high school OF **Chris Parmelee**, who is expected to make his big-league debut around 2010. Parmelee is a well-developed lefthanded batter who can hit gap to gap, and he is a good fielder. ... **WHITE SOX** RHP **Kyle McCulloch** already is fairly polished. He blends the power of a fastball that tops out around 94 mph with the finesse of a good curve, a changeup and a slider. He could reach Class AA Birmingham by the end of the year and likely will challenge for a rotation spot in two or three seasons. ... **YANKEES** RHP **Ian Kennedy** has excellent control of his fastball, changeup, curveball and slider. His experience pitching at USC and for Team USA could accelerate his ascent to the big leagues.

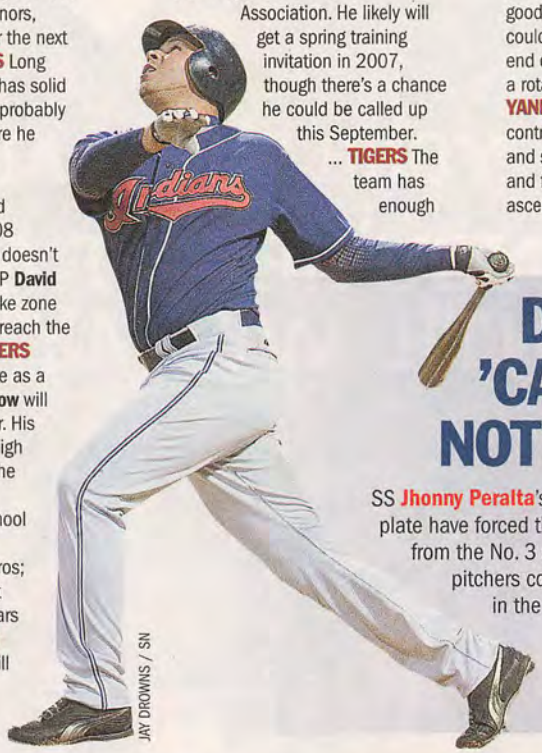
New home, same funk

2B **Edgardo Alfonzo** has displayed solid glove work since joining the Blue Jays at the end of May, but the offensive struggles he had with the Angels have followed him to Toronto. Hitting coach **Mickey Brantley** has been working with Alfonzo, 32, on using his legs more in his swing—a suggestion that could help him rediscover some power.

ADRIAN WYLD / AP

Sorry, Javy, it's nothing personal

RHP **Rodrigo Lopez** won his first three starts and pitched well in a fourth after getting **Javy Lopez** as his personal catcher, but the Orioles don't want to stick with that arrangement. They would prefer to use Javy as a stopgap replacement when C **Ramon Hernandez** needs a day off and want Rodrigo to get over his mental block and pitch well to both catchers.



JAY DROWNS / SN

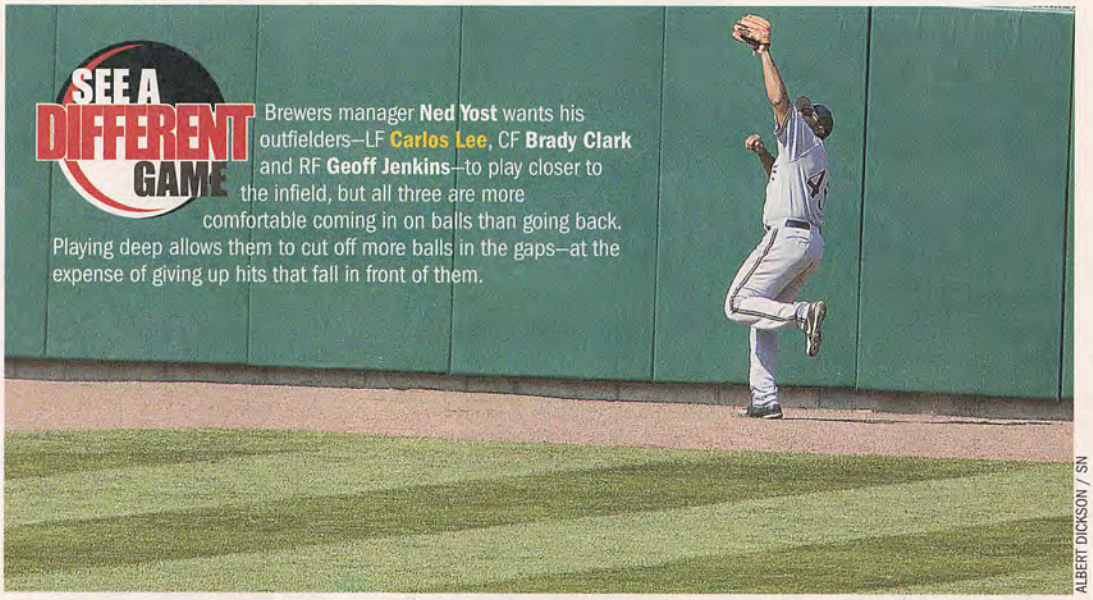
DROP HIM 'CAUSE HE'S NOT HOT

SS **Jhonny Peralta**'s continued struggles at the plate have forced the Indians to move him down from the No. 3 spot in the order. Opposing pitchers continue to get ahead of Peralta in the count with breaking balls and off-speed pitches, and he has chased too many pitches out of the strike zone.

CORRESPONDENTS: *Baltimore, Spencer Fordin; Boston, Ian Browne; Chicago, Scott Merkin; Cleveland, Anthony Castrovince; Detroit, Jason Beck; Kansas City, Jim Molony; Los Angeles, Mike Scarr; Minnesota, Kelly Thesier; New York, Mark Feinsand; Oakland, Mychael Urban; Seattle, Corey Brock; Tampa Bay, Bill Chastain; Texas, T.R. Sullivan; Toronto, Jordan Bastian.*

SPOTLIGHT: *TOP DRAFT CHOICES*

ASTROS The club believes high school prospect **Matt Sapp** has the build (6-2, 225) and the tools to be a big-league catcher. Sapp has tremendous arm strength and the athletic ability to block balls. He probably is at least four years away from getting a shot at making the team. ... **BRAVES** Scouting director **Roy Clark** believes high school OF **Cody Johnson** was the best available power hitter. Johnson, 17, will have plenty of time to develop his impressive lefthanded swing. ... **BREWERS** High school RHP **Jeremy Jeffress** touches triple digits on the radar gun. Like most young players, he must work on his secondary pitches, but he has a smooth delivery. Jeffress doesn't figure to make the big-league roster until 2010 at the earliest. ... **CARDINALS** Northeastern RHP **Adam Ottavino** throws fairly hard and has a good slider, and the team loves his mechanics and makeup. He needs time to develop, so don't expect him in St. Louis before 2009. ... **CUBS** The club surprised even OF **Tyler Colvin** by making the Clemson junior its first pick. Colvin is a slap hitter with some speed. He won't make an immediate impact in the big leagues. ... **DIAMONDBACKS** The club is convinced Missouri RHP **Max Scherzer**'s arm is sound after he had a bout of tendinitis. Scherzer's fastball hits the high 90s, and he has a hard slider. Some scouts see him as a potential closer, but the D-backs view him as a starter. Scherzer's ETA is 2008. ... **DODGERS** LHP **Clayton Kershaw** was considered the top high school pitcher in the draft. He has a classic power pitcher's frame (6-4, 210). Kershaw, who is expected to need at least three years of minor league seasoning, patterns himself after Twins LHP **Johan Santana**. ... **GIANTS** Washington RHP **Tim Lincecum** boasts a high-90s fastball, but his out pitch is a curve. He could join the Giants this September as a reliever; in the long term, he is expected to be a starter. ... **MARLINS** Missouri State RHP **Brett Sinkbeil** has a low-90s fastball and a hard slider. His changeup needs work, but he projects as a starter. ... **METS** Villanova RHP **Kevin Mulvey** is difficult to assess. He was 3-8 this season but received poor run support. It's too early to guess when he'll reach the majors. ... **NATIONALS** High school 3B **Chris Marrero** wants to reach the big leagues within three years. The club compares Marrero's bat to those of Marlins 3B **Miguel Cabrera**, Cubs 3B **Aramis Ramirez** and Brewers LF **Carlos Lee**. ... **PADRES** Wake Forest 3B **Matt Antonelli** has good size and speed and superior plate discipline. He also has the athletic ability to move to center field and figures to reach San Diego in 2008 or '09. ... **PHILLIES** RHP **Kyle Drabek** is a high schooler with a 97-mph fastball, a devastating curve and a fiery personality. He projects as a top-of-the-rotation starter—a role his father, **Doug Drabek**, once had in the majors. Look for Kyle to arrive in 2010. ... **PIRATES** **Brad Lincoln**'s fastball tops out at 96 mph, and his curve is a plus pitch. The University of Houston righthander projects as a front-line starter; if his changeup develops quickly enough, he could reach the majors by late 2008. ... **REDS** Many considered Texas OF **Drew Stubbs** the most athletic college player in the draft. One red flag is his high strikeouts totals. He might be several years away from the majors. ... **ROCKIES** Stanford RHP **Greg Reynolds** is a good fit for a team that plays at Coors Field. He developed a two-seam sinker this season to go with a low-90s four-seamer. He could arrive by 2008 and eventually join the middle of the rotation.



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

Brewers manager **Ned Yost** wants his outfielders—LF **Carlos Lee**, CF **Brady Clark** and RF **Geoff Jenkins**—to play closer to the infield, but all three are more comfortable coming in on balls than going back. Playing deep allows them to cut off more balls in the gaps—at the expense of giving up hits that fall in front of them.

SCOUTING REPORT

Giants rookie LHP **Jonathan Sanchez** has a sneaky delivery, an excellent fastball and breaking ball and good command against righthanded batters. Sanchez eventually might move into the rotation, but the club loves his confidence and poise as a reliever.

NATE BILLINGS / THE OKLAHOMAN / AP

Once Scherzer worked out the kinks in his arm, he became a hot commodity again. Now his goal is to bring more heat to the desert.

DON RYAN / AP

Reynolds

YOU'VE GOT TO LOVE IT

The Rockies believe IF **Kazuo Matsui**, acquired in a trade with the Mets last week for utilityman **Eli Marrero**, still has physical tools but needs to regain his love for the game. Matsui, 30, will play shortstop and second base at Class AAA Colorado Springs and hasn't received a promise that he will be called up.

CORRESPONDENTS: *Arizona, Steve Gilbert; Atlanta, Mark Bowman; Chicago, Carrie Muskat; Cincinnati, Mark Sheldon; Colorado, Thomas Harding; Florida, Joe Frisaro; Houston, Alyson Footer; Los Angeles, Ken Gurnick; Milwaukee, Adam McCalvy; New York, Marty Noble; Philadelphia, Ken Mandel; Pittsburgh, Ed Eagle; St. Louis, Matthew Leach; San Diego, Lyle Spencer; San Francisco, Rich Draper; Washington, Bill Ladson.*

INSIDER MATT HAYES

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Roll the dice and bet it all. Then hope like hell The Season finally arrives.

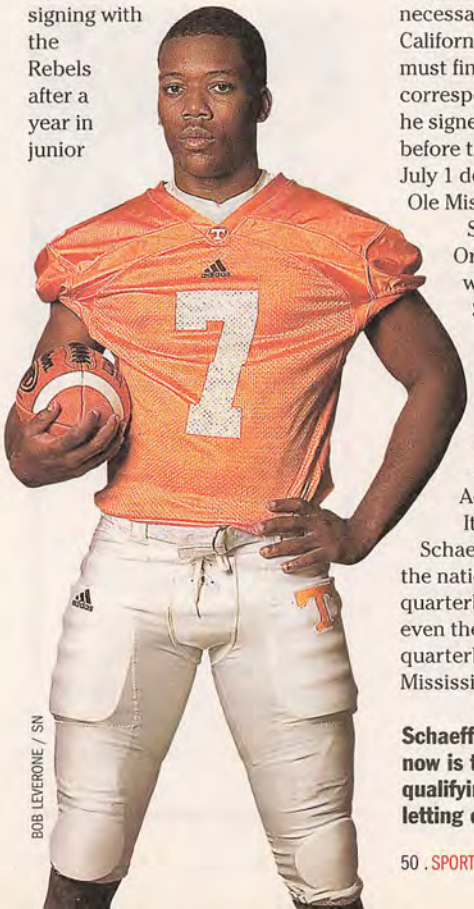
Rebel without a backup plan

The steamy South Florida summer drags ever so slowly as The Season sits at home in Deerfield Beach, a world away from Oxford, Miss. Months of anticipation soon could give way to a stark realization: It was over before it even started for Ole Miss.

"He's going to be here," says Rebels coach Ed Orgeron.

He better.

You see, *He* is The Season. *He* is Brent Schaeffer, the ubertalented quarterback Orgeron has bet the season on. In February, Schaeffer capped Orgeron's remarkable recruiting class by signing with the Rebels after a year in junior college purgatory. On that day, Orgeron named the former Tennessee starter his No. 1 quarterback, and since then, he has physically and mentally built his team around the decision.



BOB LEVERONE / SN

Unfortunately, there's one eensy-weensy problem: Schaeffer might not qualify to play this fall.

The only things creating more buzz than Schaeffer's pending arrival are the whispers of his potential dismissal, spiked by talk radio blather and message board rumors. Here, however, are the facts according to Andy Siegal, Schaeffer's offensive coordinator at the College of the Sequoias: Schaeffer has completed the necessary academic work at the California junior college but still must finish the second half of a correspondence course—which he signed up for months ago—before the rapidly approaching July 1 deadline to be admitted to Ole Miss.

So after four months of Orgeron's telling anyone who'd listen that when Schaeffer arrives, he will take the Rebels on a ride few have seen in the stately Southern city, this breakthrough season actually could hinge on some guy named Seth Adams.

It's a long way from Schaeffer to Adams. One was the nation's best junior college quarterback; the other wasn't even the best junior college quarterback in the state of Mississippi. One will give the Ole Miss offense dynamic dual-threat ability; the other, a spring walk-on, will be asked to not screw up.

Schaeffer's dual threat right now is the possibility of not qualifying academically and letting down his new team.

Look, it's not Adams' fault. In fact, he played well this spring and surprised the staff with his ability to pick up the offense and manage the game. But he's not Schaeffer, which underscores yet again that no matter the level—Pop Warner, high school, college, pro—it's all about the quarterback.

Vince Young made Mack Brown look like a genius. John David Booty will get the chance to continue the Pete Carroll lovefest. It's as simple as that.

Two years ago, Schaeffer was the first true freshman quarterback to start a season opener for an SEC team since 1973, when freshmen again were allowed to play. He suffered a broken collarbone midway through the season and had problems off the field that led to his leaving Tennessee. With two years of eligibility remaining, many coaches believed he was the nation's No. 1 recruit—high school or junior college—in February.

It was easy to hang the season on him.

"He's going to make it," Orgeron says.

He'd better. SN

BLOG ALERT

"Arkie should've been in the Big 12 all along."

If Matt Hayes were king, the Razorbacks would wallow in a Big 12 mudhole. Check out his other royal changes at sportingnews.com.

INSIDE DISH

The West Virginia administration continues to find ways to avoid finishing a contract extension for coach **Rich Rodriguez**, and Rodriguez continues to add subtle pressure. Two obstacles are a commitment to Rodriguez's staff—he wants $50,000 raises for each member—and facility improvements. The more ominous roadblock: Rodriguez wants his $2 million buyout significantly reduced or eliminated. Some advice for WVU president **David Hardesty**: Pay the assistants and commit to facility upgrades in exchange for a $3 million buyout. Or do neither—the current course—and watch Rodriguez leave for Florida State when **Bobby Bowden** retires. > Oregon's offense got another speedy weapon when the NCAA approved the eligibility of WR **Derrick Jones**, who originally signed with Southern California in 2004 but failed to qualify academically. Jones was one of the nation's top receivers at prep powerhouse Long Beach (Calif.) Poly and was expected to help fill the void when WR **Mike Williams**' NCAA appeal was denied. **Dwayne Jarrett** later stepped in as a true freshman, and, you know, he did OK. > Iowa coach **Kirk Ferentz**'s new contract looks odd on the surface. His annual salary has been doubled (from $1.4 million to $2.8 million) weeks before athletic director **Bob Bowlsby** is set to leave for Stanford. The underlying story: This deal was essentially made late last December, when Ferentz was considering a jump to the NFL (St. Louis or Minnesota). Bowlsby made an oral commitment then and began the process of restructuring the deal to give Ferentz NFL-type money.

Big Hurt

The Texans' Bennie Joppru has missed three straight seasons with injuries. Now that he's ready to run, it could be an uphill journey. *By Dennis Dillon*

This is how bad it was last year for Texans tight end Bennie Joppru: He couldn't even catch a pass in Madden NFL 06.

That's what happens when you tear a knee ligament in the spring—you get deleted from a video game.

Since Houston selected him with the 41st pick in the 2003 draft, Joppru has fallen into the NFL's black hole, devoured by adversity. He suffered a sports hernia in training camp in '03, reinjured it in minicamp in '04, then tore his right ACL during the first coaching session of the offseason in May 2005. You wouldn't pick this guy for your fantasy team given his career stats.

Touchdowns: 0.
Receptions: 0.
Games played: 0.
Seasons lost to injury: 3.

"I haven't even been hit yet," Joppru says, noting the irony. "It's absolutely ridiculous."

It's not like he had a medical red flag on his predraft resume. Joppru never missed a game because of injury at the University of Michigan, where he caught 53 passes for 579 yards and five touchdowns as a senior. He sat out only one game at Minnetonka High School in Wayzata, Minn. That was because of a collapsed lung, and though he says he could have played, it was a meaningless game before the playoffs.

Imagine training for months to run in the Boston Marathon and then, a few weeks before the race, you pull your hamstring. Imagine it happening again the next year. And the year after that. Now you have some idea of what Joppru has experienced the past three years.

"Or a guy training for the Boston Marathon who gets hit by a car and is in a coma for three years," says Joppru, taking the analogy to another level.

Now, Joppru is showing signs of life. One man who has noticed is Gary Kubiak, the Texans' new coach, who says Joppru has been the team's hardest-working player this offseason. "The time he's been here—this kid is like a coach who lives in this building," says Kubiak. "As long as he's doing that and paying the price, we're going to give him every benefit of the doubt, and I think he's going to help this team."

After the double whammy of the sports hernia, Joppru could have sunk into a deep funk 13 months ago. While running an "in" route during a noncontact drill, he planted his right foot. It got stuck in the grass and resulted in the torn ACL and another lost season. Instead of "moping around, being miserable" as he says he did the previous two years, Joppru embraced a positive attitude.

"I promised myself I wouldn't let myself get down," he says.

After surgery, Joppru stayed in Houston and worked with Tom Colt, the Texans' coordinator of rehabilitation. Although he didn't attend team meetings and practices as he did the first two years—being around the other players every day was difficult, he says—he went to home games. When he was healthy enough to run, he would go out on the field before games at Reliant Stadium. Dressed in sweats, he ran patterns and caught passes from the quarterbacks while pretending "that I was playing a game."

As he enters the final year of a four-year, $3.005 million contract, Joppru, 26, is hopeful he finally can shift his NFL career into gear. He has lost weight—at 235, he is 37 pounds lighter than he was as a rookie—and is trying to make himself more valuable by learning to play on special teams.

But he faces an uphill battle even if he stays healthy. Mark Bruener, an 11-year veteran known for his blocking, and Jeb Putzier, a free-agent import from Denver, are ahead of Joppru on the depth chart. The Texans also have Owen Daniels, a fourth-round pick this year, and Aaron Halterman, who was selected to the All-NFL Europe team this spring.

Where does Joppru fit in that crowded picture?

"His strength is that he can run. He can stretch the field," says Kubiak. "The thing he needs to get better at to become an all-around tight end is being physical at the line of scrimmage. And I think he can do that. We're expecting big things from him. Getting through the summer and staying in one piece is a big step forward to take."

It's a step that would put Joppru back in the game—both the NFL and video versions. SN

BILL BAPTIST / GETTY IMAGES

After all the pain and downtime Joppru has endured, getting hit will hurt so good.

NFL

INSIDE THE AFC

UNIT ANALYSIS
Guards/centers

A Athletic C Casey Wiegmann complements Pro Bowl Gs Will Shields and Brian Waters.

A- LG Alan Faneca and C Jeff Hartings are standouts. RG Kendall Simmons is wobbly.

B+ The interior line provides solid pass protection and explosive run blocking.

B C LeCharles Bentley is excellent, and fellow newcomer Bob Hallen provides depth.

B C Tom Nalen is the engine that makes the line run so efficiently.

B C Jeff Saturday is coming off his first Pro Bowl, and there are promising guards.

B If C Dan Koppen comes back strong from shoulder trouble, he'll be one of the best.

B C Nick Hardwick and LG Kris Dielman lead a tough and relatively young group.

B- Chester Pitts and Steve McKinney have been the team's most reliable players.

B- Kevin Mawae will be missed, but rookie C Nick Mangold offers promise.

B- C Kevin Mawae is athletic. Gs Benji Olson and Zach Piller had down years in '05.

C+ RG Chris Naeole is the team's best lineman. LG Vince Manuwai is a liability.

C+ Rex Hadnot is moving from center to right guard and likely will be above average.

C+ LG Barry Sims moves over from left tackle. C Jake Grove hasn't reached his potential.

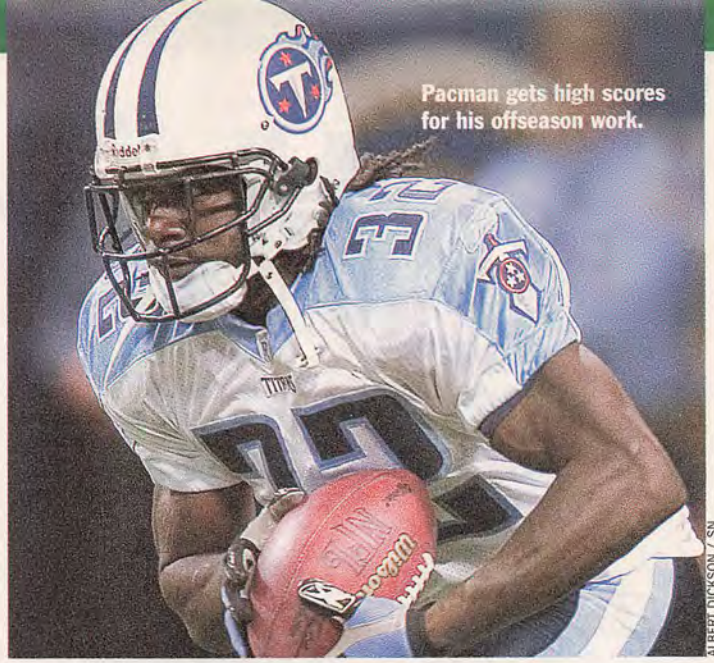
C RG Chris Villarrial is tough. LG Tutan Reyes likely will replace Bennie Anderson.

C- This has been an area of weakness for years—especially the pass blocking.

CHARGERS SLB **Shawne Merriman** has added 10 pounds but appears as fast as ever. He has worked with a boxing instructor to improve his hands and endurance. Merriman has spent many hours watching film to try to pick up ways he can improve in coverage. ... **TEXANS** rookie **DeMeco Ryans** is making a strong push to start. He is working at middle linebacker and is smart enough to grasp the system quickly and call plays. ... **DOLPHINS** DE **David Bowens**' natural spot is on the right side, but that's where **Jason Taylor** plays—and Bowens lacks the bulk to play full-time on the strong side. But he's a valuable role player who can pressure quarterbacks. Bowens has long arms, is athletic and plays with good leverage. ... **BRONCOS** OLB **D.J. Williams** likely will stay on the strong side instead of toggling between the outside spots. Williams played in 72 percent of the defensive snaps as a rookie but barely more than half in 2005. That likely will change because the team wants to use Williams more in coverage. ... The **BILLS** acquired MLB **Courtney Watson** from the Saints, and he will provide depth behind **London Fletcher**. Watson is coming off a torn right MCL, and he lacks the size (6-1, 245) to take on offensive linemen. But he has the quickness and athleticism to pursue and make plays. ... The **PATRIOTS** acquired DT **Johnathan Sullivan**, who has been a disappointment since being the No. 6 overall draft pick in 2003, from the Saints. Sullivan (6-3, 315) will back up NT **Vince Wilfork** and be expected to tie up blockers. ... The **COLTS** signed QB **Shaun King**, who provides insurance because primary backup **Jim Sorgi** has a sore arm. King lacks a big arm but has directed winning teams, including the **Tony Dungy**-coached Buccaneers in 1999 and 2000. ... The **RAIDERS'** **Tyler Brayton** is back at end after spending the past two seasons at outside linebacker. His best season was at end as a rookie, when he displayed speed, strength and a high motor. Brayton, who is expected to start, needs to develop a go-to move. ... **Chaun Thompson** and rookie **D'Qwell Jackson** will battle for a starting inside linebacker job in the **BROWNS'** 3-4 scheme. Thompson is bigger and faster than Jackson, but Jackson might be more instinctive and is ultracompetitive. ... CB **Pacman Jones** has been impressive in the **TITANS'** organized team activities. Jones is physical and runs extremely well. He has excellent ball awareness, especially on deep throws. Jones needs to improve his technique and tackling. ... **Bryan Thomas** will attempt to make the transition from down lineman to standup linebacker in the **JETS'** 3-4. Thomas lacks the athletic ability to drop into coverage and the agility to move sideline to sideline, but he does have some straight-line speed, which could make him an effective pass rusher. ... By acquiring QB **Steve McNair**, the **RAVENS** ended inconsistent **Kyle Boller**'s three-year run as starter. The Ravens will try to keep Boller confident and sharp because McNair gets injured often. Boller, though, is not the ideal stopgap player because he has been a notoriously slow starter. ... **BENGALS** backup FS **Kevin Kaesviharn** isn't an enforcer against the run, but he excels in pass defense because he rarely gets caught out of position, can outjump receivers and makes plays on the ball.

ROBERT SEALE / SN

If you thought Merriman was good as a rookie ...


Pacman gets high scores for his offseason work.

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

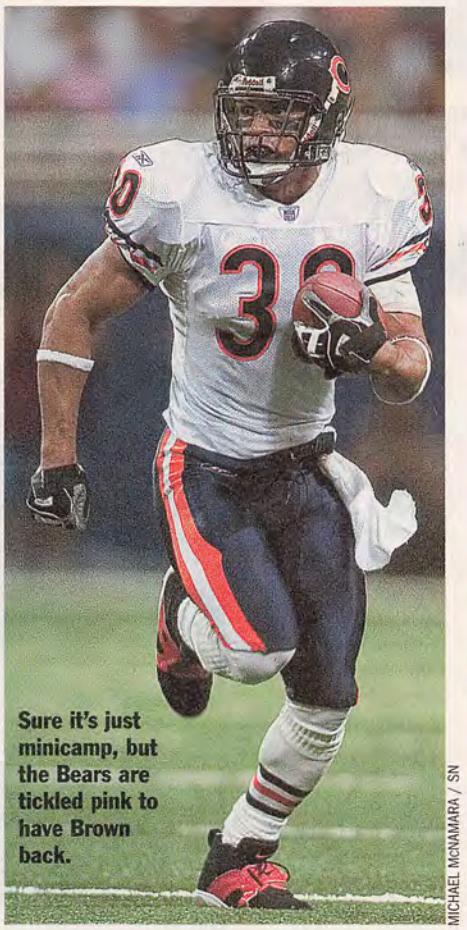
CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Bart Hubbuch; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jason Cole; New England, Tom Curran; New York, Rich Cimini; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.

> INSIDE DISH

There is speculation inside the Steelers' organization that **Bill Cowher** might coach only one or two more seasons. Cowher has two years left on his contract, and the team has discussed extending the deal. Cowher and his wife recently bought a $2.5 million house in North Carolina, where they plan to live after he retires. > There's growing concern among team insiders that the Lions never will find a way to motivate WR **Mike Williams**, whose desire to play has come into question. Williams, fined repeatedly for being late to meetings as a rookie last year, was suspended for the final two days of a recent mandatory minicamp for missing a treatment and being late for a meeting. > The longer the Chiefs go without getting some indication from RB **Priest Holmes** about his future, the more uneasy they get about the situation. Look for the team to acquire a veteran before the season to back up **Larry Johnson**. > 49ers QB **Cody Pickett** will get some practice time at wide receiver and H-back to see if he can play a Slash-like role. Pickett is facing increased competition from **Shaun Hill** and **Jesse Palmer** for the No. 3 quarterback job, and his ability to play another position could be a selling point for keeping four

INSIDE THE NFC

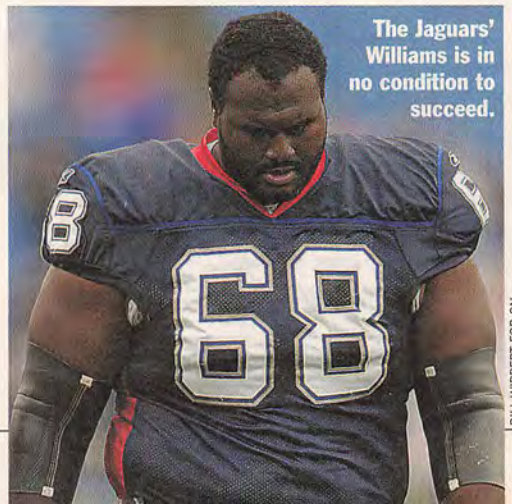
COWBOYS starting FS **Marcus Coleman** is getting reps at cornerback. The team hopes he can be a swing player who adds flexibility to the roster. During a recent minicamp, he struggled some with the footwork and technique needed to play corner. ... Second-year CB **Dovonte Edwards** has a comfortable lead in the competition for the **VIKINGS'** nickel back job. A scrappy player, he has good size (6-0, 182), long arms and decent speed. When Edwards comes in, starting LCB **Antoine Winfield**, who is smaller and more physical, moves to the slot. ... The **BUCCANEERS** have been pleased with the offseason work of DT **Anthony Bryant**, who has shed nearly 30 pounds and has improved his stamina. If he keeps improving, Bryant could challenge **Anthony McFarland** and **Chris Hovan** for playing time on running downs. ... DT **Jason Fisk** adds much-needed experience to the **RAMS'** defensive line and will spell starter **Jimmy Kennedy**. Fisk was miscast as a nose tackle in Cleveland's 3-4 last season but is a savvy player who will help plug running lanes. ... A pair of recent signees, **Tommy Polley** (Ravens) and **Jay Foreman** (Giants), could work into the **SAINTS'** linebacker mix. Both are quick and have good playmaking range and versatility, though neither is a physical player who takes on blockers. ... Injuries have limited **BEARS** SS **Mike Brown** to 14 games over the past two seasons, so his on-field presence during minicamp was a welcome sight. When he played last season, Brown thrived in his move from free safety; playing closer to the line helped him be a bigger force against the run. ... The **GIANTS** signed **Boo Williams**, who will battle incumbent **Visanthe Shiancoe** for the backup tight end job. Williams missed last season with a knee injury but is a good athlete with reliable hands. ... **SEAHAWKS** LG **Floyd "Pork Chop" Womack** might never be the player he is replacing, **Steve Hutchinson**, but so far Womack hasn't looked like a weak link, either. He has the mass to hold up against big defensive tackles, and his improved physical condition has made him quicker on his feet. ... Look for second-year DT **Mike Patterson** to become the **EAGLES'** top inside player this season. Though he hit the rookie wall last season, Patterson flashed signs of being a tough run stopper who also can get to the quarterback. ... Because of his explosiveness, **PACKERS** RB **Samkon Gado** should be a natural for the team's new zone-blocking system, but right now he is thinking too much. Rather than trying so hard to analyze where the hole will be, he needs to rely more on feel. ... **LeRon McCoy**, a 2005 seventh-round pick, might eventually challenge **Bryant Johnson** for the **CARDINALS'** No. 3 wide receiver job. McCoy has improved his pass-catching and route-running skills and has tried to match starting WR **Anquan Boldin**'s work ethic. ... **Cedric Killings** often is overlooked in the **REDSKINS'** defensive tackle rotation, but he has good size (6-2, 310) and excellent quickness. He takes on blockers and fills holes. Killings has the potential to eventually take over for **Cornelius Griffin** or **Joe Salave'a**. ... SLB **Ike Reese** was a poor fit defensively in his first year with the **FALCONS** and a disappointment on special teams, given how many blown assignments he had. Though Reese is miscast in the defensive scheme, he has the speed to reclaim his standing as a special teams force.



Sure it's just minicamp, but the Bears are tickled pink to have Brown back.

MICHAEL MCNAMARA / SN

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Darren Urban; Atlanta, George Henry; Carolina, Pat Yasinskas; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Mark Craig; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Ralph Vacchiano; Philadelphia, Mark Eckel; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.



The Jaguars' Williams is in no condition to succeed.

BILL WIPPERT FOR SN

quarterbacks on the roster. > The early returns in Jacksonville on OL **Mike Williams** aren't good. The former first-round pick of the Bills is out of shape and nowhere near his target weight of 340. He also has been slow to pick up the blocking schemes, prompting coach **Jack Del Rio** to say Williams faces an uphill battle to make the team. > There was concern that WR **Keyshawn Johnson** might be a disruptive force in the Panthers' locker room, but so far he has been saying and doing the right things. A more legitimate concern might be how WR **Steve Smith** meshes with Johnson. Smith plays with a chip on his shoulder and could make some noise if Johnson takes away too many of his catches.

UNIT ANALYSIS
Guards/centers

B+ Pro Bowl C Olin Kreutz anchors the line. The team has a solid trio of guards.

B+ Gs Chris Snee and David Diehl and C Shaun O'Hara can run-block with the best.

B LG Larry Allen strengthens the interior, and C Jeremy Newberry's return helps.

B With rookie G Davin Joseph on board, this is one of the Bucs' deepest positions.

B- C Justin Hartwig likely will be an upgrade, but RG Evan Mathis is a question mark.

B- Steve Hutchinson is the NFL's best left guard. Injuries cost C Matt Birk all of '05.

B- C Andy McCollum and RG Adam Timmerman aren't getting any younger.

B- The key will be how well Floyd "Pork Chop" Womack plays at left guard.

B- C Casey Rabach is solid. RG Randy Thomas is coming off a serious leg injury.

C+ LG Reggie Wells is capable; new RG Milford Brown needs to take a step forward.

C+ There's above-average potential. Dallas needs a big year from RG Marco Rivera.

C+ The group will be solid if LG Jermane Mayberry bounces back and C Jeff Faine pans out.

C Yes, they can clear room for the rushing attack, but the pass protection stinks.

C The group lacks dominating strength. LG Ross Verba adds experience and pulling power.

C Todd Herremans will get the first shot at the left guard job; center remains up for grabs.

D- Two years ago, the Packers had one of the strongest interiors. Now it's being rebuilt.

INSIDER MIKE DeCOURCY

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George Karl used to tease his son about growing up soft and lazy. He knows better now.

Now, back to your regularly scheduled life

On a Tuesday night, junior guard Coby Karl missed a shot that would have sent the Boise State Broncos into overtime against Fresno State. By Wednesday morning, he had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

Obviously, learning of his affliction was worse than his poor shooting performance in the tough defeat—but not enough to make him forget the game. "Both of those on top of each other weren't the best thing for me," he says.

So if you're wondering why he competed last week at the NBA predraft camp three months after hearing the words "you have cancer," well, here's your answer: Coby Karl is his father's son.

Now the Denver Nuggets head coach, George Karl was a knee-scrape of a player with North Carolina and the San Antonio Spurs. After his diagnosis, Coby played two games and averaged 17 points and 7.5 rebounds. Both father and son have beaten back cancer. Coby also would like to say both played in the NBA.

But he wasn't kidding anyone into thinking that day will come in 2006-07, saying, "Honestly, I'm just here for the experience." He has grown from a skinny 6-2 high schooler with no Division I offers into a 6-4, 210-pound wing with 1,240 career points, and Coby has a year of eligibility left.

The only remaining evidence of his illness is a thin red scar running below his Adam's apple, where a tumor was removed. His arms bulged with muscles as he rested them on a table while speaking at the camp. Earlier, he played with aggressiveness and efficiency in his first game and scored eight points, including an NBA-range 3-pointer.

"I think physically, I did get stronger," he says. "And mentally—obviously, if you go through a process like that—I got stronger, also."

JOHN RAOUX / AP

Like father, like son. George Karl has a wealth of advice to offer his son, on and off the court.

Upon completing treatment in May, he felt listless and low, lacked energy and feared he would not be able to recover his ability. His father offered to call the league and explain why Coby wouldn't attend camp. Coby did not want to miss the opportunity. The predraft camp is a baller's heaven, with all these fine players—Syracuse's Gerry McNamara, Louisville's Taquan Dean, Iowa State's Curtis Stinson—being evaluated by the NBA elite.

"He had to get in shape," George Karl says. "He had to get his jumper back. He had to get his feel for the game back. He's done a great job. I'm very proud of him."

During Coby's treatment, his dad was leading the Nuggets into the NBA playoffs. So soon after his own surgery for prostate cancer, George admits there were many times he thought about taking a leave of absence to be with his son.

"You have down days. It messes with you," George says. "No matter how tough we are as competitors, you don't want to fight cancer."

Now, Coby says his doctors believe he's a winner in this one-on-one workout. His form of cancer does not affect the lifespan of 95 percent of patients; he has been told he is among that group.

He can go back to worrying about missed jump shots. They're still a big deal. **SN**

Make the days leading up to the NBA draft go faster by spending them at sportingnews.com.

INSIDE DISH

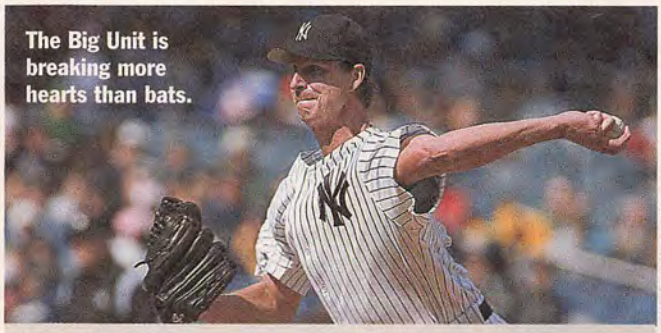
Memphis coaches rejected speculation they would not welcome back G **Darius Washington** if he were to withdraw from the NBA draft. They understand that Washington is the one established scorer on the roster. Although he played well at the NBA predraft camp, he seemed to realize he was not a hot draft prospect. > UCLA G **Jordan Farmar** competed at the camp with hopes of establishing himself as a solid first-round pick. If he remains eligible for the draft, his replacement is **Darren Collison**. The Bruins are pleased Collison has added 20 pounds of muscle. They wisely got him plenty of playing time as a freshman. > Elite backcourt prospect **Jerryd Bayless** of Phoenix abandoned his commitment to Arizona, something he'd been hinting at since the spring. Expect Texas and Arizona State to make plays for him. > G **Daniel Gibson** is almost certain to stay in the draft—along with C/F **LaMarcus Aldridge** and F **P.J. Tucker**—so expect Texas to play much differently. It should pick up the pace and rely on playmaking freshman G **D.J. Augustin**. > ESPN apparently hopes the new Thanksgiving weekend exempt tournament it is introducing at the Disney's Wide World of Sports Complex can become sort of a Maui East. ESPN should leverage the exposure it can provide and the appeal of the Orlando area theme parks to create an impressive event. The first field—Southern Illinois, Arkansas and Virginia Tech are featured—is just a start.

Insights from the editors of Fantasy Source Baseball, your online fantasy authority: fantasygames.sportingnews.com/baseball.

SQUEEZEPLAY

BY GEORGE WINKLER

Is it silly to say fantasy owners develop special relationships with players? Not if you consider some of the letters we've "received."



The Big Unit is breaking more hearts than bats.

JOHN DUNN FOR SN

Dear Big Unit:

Where has your fastball gone? Why are you talking crazy to me? I still believe in you, so give me a sign. Last year, you went 8-2 with a 3.31 ERA after the All-Star break and rewarded your faithful owners. Should I trade for you? Most of your recent starts have been encouraging. The Yankees will win for you. The Boss won't have it any other way.

Buying Low in the Bronx

Dear Bronson:

I don't know how much longer we can keep this up. I know you don't like change, but leaving Boston worked out well, didn't it? You'll get used to your new fantasy team, too. Your favorable record at home leaves me confused. Rather than keep my feelings inside until a big blow-up, I'm trading you now. I hope to get some steals and/or saves in return.

Selling High in Cincinnati

Dear Nomar:

Something has changed between us. I used to be bitter. It could have been all those times you stood me up. You always had good excuses: a severe groin injury, a sore Achilles', a surgically repaired wrist and, oh yeah, that Mia woman. But all that is starting to melt away as I check out your hits total. Could the magic be back? Let's give it another shot.

Back On in Chavez Ravine

Dear Lastings:

I think we have a chance at a lasting relationship, even when Xavier comes back. That could be messy, but I enjoy having you on my fantasy team more. Is that so wrong? All the high-fives you gave fans after your first big-league homer showed me what kind of player you really are. You're sure to give plenty to fantasy owners in years to come.

Finders Keepers in Flushing

Dear Barry:

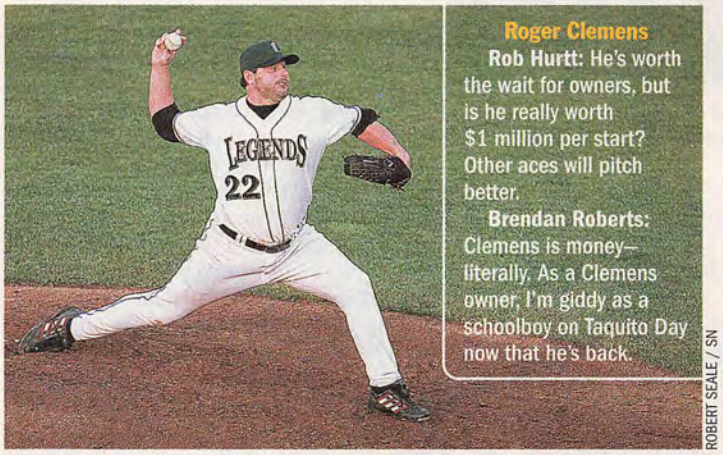
I've always had a thing for bad boys, but now you are just plain bad. The bat speed is still there, like when you were passing Willie Mays at 660. But watching you limp after fly balls also reminds me of Mays—in his Mets days. You show up at night but disappear during day games. We're breaking up; leave your keys on the table and walk out the door.

Forlorn in Frisco

Decide if breaking up is right to do by getting all the info you need at fantasysource.sportingnews.com/baseball.

Wordcount

Brevity is a beautiful thing. Our experts dissect four players in 20 words or fewer.



ROBERT SEALE / SN

Roger Clemens

Rob Hurtt: He's worth the wait for owners, but is he really worth $1 million per start? Other aces will pitch better.

Brendan Roberts: Clemens is money—literally. As a Clemens owner, I'm giddy as a schoolboy on Taquito Day now that he's back.

Corey Patterson

RH: Baltimore couldn't resuscitate Sammy, but this ex-Cub is hitting again and stealing like the Hamburglar. Don't buy high, though.

BR: A player tanks for the Cubs but shines elsewhere. Like that hasn't happened before. He's for real; I heart Corey.

Akinori Otsuka

RH: Why mess with a good thing? Francisco Cordero is a capable closer, but Otsuka has been outstanding since replacing him.

BR: Cordero, the superior pitcher, will have his job back by the All-Star break. Sayonara, Aki.

Rocco Baldelli

RH: Baldelli hasn't played since 2004. Even if he sprayed WD-40 on his hamstring, knee and elbow, he'd still be rusty.

BR: Injuries, shminjuries. Baldelli has the potential to be one of the game's best; he's healthy now, which is what matters.

Txt Msgs

Fantasy advice delivered to a wireless phone.

Big Tex: Tym 2 deal Rngrs' Txra?
> No, just w8 till 2nd hlf

Big Tex: Is Dbax Webb 4 real?
> U bet, but he's better b4 ASB

Big Tex: Young SP, Hamels or Hensley?
> Hnsly's @ Petco, but Hmls = K's

Big Tex: Luv Dru in LA?
> No thx. 2 rsky

Big Tex: U c hot strk 4 A-Rod soon?
> 2 good not 2 happen

Big Tex: Ur 2nd hlf MVP?
> CLE DH Hfnr

Big Tex: Thx. C u 18r —*Vinnie Iyer*

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

DAVE KINDRED

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Where there's 'Smoke,' there's a lot of pain and not much common sense.

These rules weren't made to be broken—even when the drivers are

Because they're full to the brim with macho nuttiness, and because NASCAR's rules are inhumane on their way to insane, men will drive 200 miles per hour in traffic when they should be at home in a recliner letting their broken bones heal.

So, if they call you "Smoke," as the stock car folks do with Tony Stewart, you can't wimp out just because you wrecked twice on a weekend and put a crack in your shoulder blade that hurts so much you have to be loaded into and pulled out of your racecar like you're a big ol' lumpy bag of horse feed, some crewmen tugging at your top end, others pushing from the bottom.

When Stewart drove at Dover early this month, he did it only because NASCAR's rules would allow him no points toward the season championship unless he started the race. He needed to run one lap; then he could be replaced by a relief driver and the points earned would belong to Stewart.

Tell me that makes any kind of sense.

If a driver says he's hurt, let a doctor certify it. Call in a relief driver. Give the injured driver whatever points the relief man earns.

Instead, Tony Stewart puts himself and every other driver at risk because he works in pain. It's pain that must go untreated by drugs because NASCAR *does* have enough sense to know that if it's a bad idea to operate heavy machinery under the influence of painkilling drugs, it's an even worse idea to trade paint at 200 mph.

Stewart's plan at Dover was to give the wheel to Ricky Rudd after the first caution flag. Unfortunately, that caution came after 37 long, painful laps on the concrete, bumpity-bumpity track known as the Monster Mile. By the time Stewart was lifted from the driver's seat, he was in agony.

CHRIS GARDNER / AP

Stewart wouldn't need this kind of assistance getting out of his Barcalounger, which is where he should be recovering.

"Tony wore his guts out," crew chief Greg Zipadelli says.

Is that a good idea, to have a man in distress racing?

"It's the rules," Zipadelli says, his tone that of the resigned realist who knows the heavy hammers of NASCAR win all the rules debates.

Rules insisting that injured drivers must start a race were born in the dark ages of the original NASCAR emperor, Bill France. Back then, the fullest measure of a racer's valor was made by sound. "He clanks when he walks," the crew chief Harry Hyde said of Chargin' Charlie Glotzbach.

So a man who can't raise his right arm to brush his teeth will suck up the pain and attach himself to the steering wheel, as the late Davey Allison once did with the help of Velcro glued to a cast on his arm. Because Mel Kenyon lost most of his left hand to fire, he created a steel coupling that hooked the remnant of his hand to the wheel. Darrell Waltrip raced with four broken ribs, a broken arm and a broken femur. Sterling Marlin checked himself out of a hospital's burn unit to race and came back to bed afterward.

How about duct tape? A week before the 1984 Daytona 500, a crash left Rudd's head so battered that his pupils ran blood-red and his face was misshapen by hematomas the color and texture of rotted flesh. A small girl in a restaurant screamed at the sight of him, and a Rudd crewman didn't blame her: "He looked like a monster."

Ugly is one thing. Blind is another. Rudd discovered that under the G-forces in Daytona's steeply banked turns, his swollen eyes went shut. During a break in a practice session, he looked around his garage. Saw a roll of duct tape. Ripped off a strip. Pressed it on his eyelids. Slapped it against his forehead. *Voila.* With his eyes taped open, Rudd finished seventh in that Daytona 500. Perfect, then, that Rudd, 22 years later, would be Stewart's relief driver at Dover and ready to jump in the following Sundays at Pocono and Michigan.

As it happens, for the Michigan 400 on June 18, there'll be a Father's Day logo on Stewart's Home Depot Chevrolet. "Which is only fitting," Zipadelli says, "because Home Depot is every father's favorite store. All those cool power tools."

Besides, should Stewart win, the broken shoulder blade would make it hard to do his traditional victory climb up the safety fence at the finish line. So the crew chief has a plan.

"We'll send somebody to the store," he says, laughing, "to get a ladder." **SN**

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